

Between Time and Space

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Between Time and Space

by [skylightsparkle](#)

Summary

There's a balance to the world, a fragile but powerful one that keeps everything in motion. Something has started to shift and change that balance with potential cataclysmic consequences, and not everything is as it seems. This is barely the beginning, but for Ash and his friends, it might very well be the end.

Sequel to The Master of Mirage.
AU Novelization of The Rise of Darkrai.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Welcome To Alamos Town



Unown scattered, scurrying away as two tall, dark shadows faced once another. Their glowing eyes, and the faint pink and blue outlines that surrounded them were really the only way to see them amidst the darkness. Cries that echoed through time and space were heard for for all and none to hear, and then they charged.

Bright brown eyes snapped open, and a moment later, 14-year-old Ash Ketchum shot up in his blue sleeping bag. He gasped for a moment, before he searched around their campsite for something, though he wasn't quite sure what. There was nothing of interest in sight, the embers of the fire all but gone out as the sun peaked over the mountains on the horizon.

“Pikapi?”

He glanced down into the worried eyes of his best friend and partner, smiling slightly as he rubbed the soft fur on Pikachu's head. “I'm okay buddy. It's just a nightmare.”

“You sure?” a child-like, feminine voice asked, calm, curious and tired. Ash looked to his other side and saw his smaller than average Riolu looking up at him with her worried red eyes. There was an imprint in the little nest she had made of comfortable grass where Pikachu had obviously been before. Pikachu was always one to take care of the young baby pokemon, and Riolu had been no different. The two would often curl up together in order to keep an eye out for the other.

Pikachu jumped off of Ash and joined his younger friend, both gazing at their trainer with worry as Riolu whispered into Ash's mind, “Your aura was funny.”

“Yeah, Ria, it was just a nightmare, I promise,” Ash assured them, both out loud and through the mental link that they had as well. “I think I'm going to try and get a little bit more sleep before Dawn wakes up and starts going crazy again. You two should too.”

“Pi Pikapi.”

“Okay Ash.” Both of the pokemon snuggled together, and fell asleep not long after. Ash smiled warmly at the two of them, so proud of them, and all of his beloved pokemon for that matter. Little Riolu, who he called Ria more often than not, was an interesting one. Like him, she had the ability to use aura, and because he was actively trying to teach himself how to use and control it, she was

learning along with him in leaps and bounds, even teaching him some things. That also might have been because a part of her soul, her spirit, her aura, or whatever it was, came from the Lucario that Ash first met when finding out that he was more than what he seemed. That Lucario had died to save Mew, to save everyone, but a part of him had been reborn in little Ria. That might have been why she started using telepathy just recently, but only to speak to him. She was still too shy to project her thoughts to anyone else.

Strengthening that bond with her taught Ash many things, and as he laid back down in his sleeping bag, he was a bit proud of himself too. It was hard to explain, but it was almost like he blended his aura with every new pokemon that he captured. It allowed him to silently feel how they were doing, to silently encourage or discourage them, or simply remind them that he was there. The ones he had over a period of time – like Pikachu – he could even communicate mentally to tell them what to do in battle. He was still working on that, but Ash was excited about that aspect of his aura, because it gave him the advantage of surprise during a battle.

A yawn escaped his lips and he realized that he should actually try to get a little bit more sleep before it was time to get up. They were so close to their destination, that he had no doubt that his friends would want to be up bright and early. He closed his eyes, and sought out the familiar auras that belonged to his friends. Brock was snoring loudly across from him, but he'd be up soon enough, preparing breakfast for them while attempting to teach Ash himself how to cook something edible. As Brock turned 19, both of them had a feeling that his journey was going to take a new direction soon, one that didn't run in the same direction as Ash's, and the older boy wanted to make sure Ash could definitely take care and cook for himself.

They'd been best friends for four years, since Ash was 10 and Brock was 15, and Brock had silently adopted Ash into his already big family as a little brother, so it was no surprise that he'd want to make sure he'd be okay.

He turned his attention to the youngest of the group, a new trainer and coordinator named Dawn Berlitz. She was peacefully curled up in her sleep bag, cuddling her Piplup to her chest. A small smile passed over Ash's face, because he had no doubt that her long, blue hair would be a jumbled mess that she'd freak out about in the morning. He honestly liked Dawn. She was smart, confident, witty, and had no problem pointing out when he was being annoying or stupid. At the same time though, when he gave advice, she was always eager to listen to it. She was so upbeat and bubbly most of the time, that it was hard to be upset when she was around.

Like the unfortunate events that led to him meeting Misty and May before, Pikachu had completely destroyed Dawn's bike. She didn't seem to care all that much, and seemed more eager to have a friend to travel with. It might have been strange for a 10-year-old girl to travel with two older boys, but she easily wormed her way into their hearts as a younger sister. Dawn's mother was just relieved that her daughter had someone to help her, someone to look up to and talk to.

Another yawn escaped Ash, and he finally let himself drift off to sleep, the memories of his strange dream completely leaving his mind in place of happy, encouraging thoughts of his friends.

...

It was just another average day of walking, one foot in front of the next on a dirt road made for traveling trainers. It was possible to travel through massive highways from city to city, but what kind of trainer wanted to do that? There were little to no pokemon that way, and it was awfully dangerous.

Though they were doing the same thing they almost always did, the sun was shining in the bright blue sky, and they were almost to their destination, and it made all of them a little more excited.

Walking a little faster than normal, with Pikachu on his head and Ria sitting on his backpack, Ash strode few feet ahead of Brock and Dawn, even if Brock had the guide.

“We're almost there, right?” Dawn asked Brock suddenly, dark blue eyes looking over at him curiously.

He chuckled a little at her and nodded his head. “Yeah, we're almost there. It should be coming up really soon.”

“Pi pikachu!” Pikachu cried out, pointing at something that no one else had yet to spot yet. Ash walked a few more feet and then a grin appeared on his face as Alamos Town appeared in the distance, surrounded by a mountain terrain.

“There it is!” Ash cried out as he took off running. He heard Dawn let out a laugh behind him, rushing after him even though she couldn't keep up with his large strides.

“I can't wait for the contest!” Dawn cheered happily. Though the Ribbon could count towards the five that Dawn needed to enter the Sinnoh Grand Festival, it was also open to trainers from all the other regions as well, since it was one of the ones that happened only once a year. The other one was the Wallace Cup, which traveled to a different region and a different area every year, run by the Hoenn Champion, Wallace. This one was said to be one of the most impressive contests to be at, since people from all over the world travelled to Alamos Town for it.

Ash himself was hoping to find some good battles when he got there, already excited at the prospect of it. Pikachu and Ria seemed to sense his excitement, both cooing happily as he ran.

Then he skidded to a stop as the road vanished in front of him. He stopped a few feet before the drop off, and his arm shot out to stop Dawn from falling, the younger girl colliding with it roughly and letting out a gasp of surprise. Ash carefully pushed her back, warily looking at the edge that she could have fallen over. She didn't mind though, just staring blankly at Alamos Town.

While it was very close, it was also on a high plateau that just happened to be opposite the cliffside they were on. There was a bridge connecting it to the rest of the land, but it was quite a ways away.

“Uh,” Brock looked at his guide and started twisting it around before letting out a forced laugh. “Looks like we took a wrong turn a while back. We'll have to backtrack.”

“Backtrack?” Ash repeated slowly. “And you guys always used to yell at me for getting us lost!” Ash snatched the map out of his hands, finding Alamos Town easily since there wasn't much else around it, and then tracing back to where they were supposed to go. He let out a groan. “So far.”

“I'm exhausted already,” Dawn said, flopping to the dirt in a dramatic pile. She was usually a trooper, never really complaining much unless she really meant it. Except for something that she was really passionate about, then she could complain, whine, or rage, it depending on the situation.

She was right to be exhausted though. They had been walking for hours already, and it would at least take an hour to backtrack, and then several more to actually get back to Alamos Town unless they wanted to try and get through the trees, but there were all kinds of problems with that according to the map.

Besides, they were supposed to be meeting someone in Alamos Town and said that they would be there today.

“Hey! Would you all like a lift?”

The voice came out of nowhere, startling them all until Ash felt the warm presence of another person. He looked up, blinking with surprise to see a giant yellow and green hot air balloon coming down towards them.

With the sun shining so brightly, it was hard to see who was speaking to them, but at the ridiculous sounds Brock started making, Ash realized that it was probably an attractive young woman a few years older than his friend. That was the way he worked.

Sure enough, as the balloon descended, he could finally see the waving, young woman. Her hair was a light blond that darkened at the bottom of her hair, and she wore a pink sweater with a pale blue scarf tied around her neck. What Ash really noticed though, was the Chimchar hanging off her balloon. He was much more interested in the fire-type than he was the young woman.

She giggled and motioned for them to climb on her basket when she was level with them. "Come on in. I'm heading over that way anyway, so it's not a problem."

Brock practically pranced onto the hot air balloon. "What are you guys waiting around for? Come on!"

Ash and Dawn exchanged identical amused looks before they both shook their heads. Ash let her get on before him, just in case she slipped going over the slight gap between the cliff and the basket of the balloon. Then he jumped over, both Ria and Pikachu looking over the ledge at the scenery below them almost immediately.

They barely moved before Brock jumped forward, clasping his hands together as a hopeless blush appeared on his face. "We are forever in your debt for your kindness! So my name, dear, is Brock. Would you honour me and tell me your name?"

Dawn and Ash both looked around at him with disbelieving looks, though they really shouldn't have been surprised.

Still, the woman didn't seem put off by this, smiling warmly and saying, "My name's Alice."

"So it's Alice! From Alamos Town!" He suddenly ducked down to his bag, scrambling through it and taking out of small book. He started flipping through it almost desperately. "I can't believe I don't have you written down in my little blue book of babes. Silly me!" He flopped over in what looked like sheer depression.

"That's a thing?" Dawn asked, glancing up at Ash.

"Yes, and you're not reading it until you at least have a 'teen' on the end of your age so don't even think about it," Ash shook his head. "I wish I could unread it. Remind me to take that from him later and throw it off the side of the city or something."

"There's only one thing I can do!" Brock popped back up. "Let me take you out on a da..." His voice trailed off as his Croagunk appeared, jabbing him with his Poison Jab. The first time that this happened, Ash worried a lot because it was a poison jab, but Brock assured them that it was annoying, and he didn't like it in the least, but he wasn't actually being poisoned. So he wasn't really worried as Brock fell to the floor, especially as he muttered, "After Croagunk takes me out."

Dawn let out a weak laugh before smiling up at Alice. "My name's Dawn. I'm entering the Alamos Town Pokemon Contest!"

"And I'm Ash," he smiled broadly. "This is Pikachu and Ria, my Riolu." The two pokémon in question waved at her enthusiastically. "Uh...sorry about Brock." He laughed weakly. "This always

happens. Thank you for taking us across though.”

Alice laughed at them. “It's alright. He's very...passionate, isn't he?” She leaned against the edge of the basket. “It's not a problem. I work part time as a hot-air ballon tour guide, so Chimchar and I can get you over there in no time! There's no better spot to see the Town from.” She motioned down to Alamos Town, made up of quaint houses that sloped up a hill, reaching the massive towers in the middle. “Though, I'm also a music student too.” She held out a leaf to them.

Ash stared at the leaf with confusion, and she chuckled a bit at his expression before putting it to her lips. He was more than just a little surprised as she actually managed to string together a rather nice-sounding song, all from a leaf.

“A leaf whistle!” Dawn said happily.

“That's a thing?” He unknowingly repeated her words from earlier.

“Obviously.” She shot Ash an annoyed look and focused on Alice again.

Ash was more distracted by the pokemon that flew over as the music started to play. He knew that a lot of them did like different types of music (the pokedex and Professor Oak said so), but the song that she was playing on her leaf whistle seemed to really calm the flying-types around them. “Wow.”

Alice laughed. “I don't know why they love that song so much, but they do. And in return, they show me which way the wind is blowing!” She looked up. “Alright, Chimcar!”

The fire-type flipped happily and then shot a blast of fire up into the balloon, explaining why it didn't have the same type of thing as other hot air balloons had. With the warm wind picking up, they sailed towards the town quickly, completely missing Carnivine Balloon blowing up and go sailing off behind them.

“Look at the towers!” Dawn cheered, almost leaning over the edge of the basket slightly. Ash grabbed her backpack to keep her from pitching over the side in her excitement. He had to admit though, her reaction was warranted, because the massive, looming towers were really impressive.

“The Space-Time Towers,” Alice informed them with a smile.

“Space-Time?” Ash repeated. That seemed like a bit of an odd name for something.

“Rio ri riolu?” Riolu looked at Pikachu clearly and pointed at the towers.

“Pi pikachu!” He smiled, agreeing that they were really big but really cool, simply put.

“I read something about those in my guide book,” Brock said, pulling that back out and flipping through it for a moment. “Here we are. The Space-Time Towers were designed by the brilliant architect Godey 100 years ago.”

“That's right,” Alice agreed and pointed down at a circular part that came off the back of the two, tall towers. “And, right there is where we have our contests. All our hotels and the Pokemon Center is almost entirely booked! I hope you guys made some plans already!”

“We did,” Ash assured her with a nod. “But yeah, 100 years ago? That's pretty amazing!” He had seen things that were much, much older than that, but 100 years was nothing to put down, especially for something in such obviously good condition.

"There's more here," Brock spoke up, reading from his guide. "The tower on the right represents time, and the one on the left represents space."

"Really? That's cool!" Dawn pointed down at them. "The colours are really pretty too. Pink and blue are my favourites!"

Brock chuckled at her, and normally, Ash would have, but his body went completely tense as he felt it. There was something, he had no idea what, but something that gave off a lot of energy. He couldn't even tell where it was coming from, because it was like it was coming from all directions.

He wasn't the only one who noticed either. Ria let out an unhappy sound, clinging to his collar, while Pikachu's fur and ears stuck up on end.

The balloon shook, an invisible wave knocking them back and fourth in the air. Alice and Dawn grabbed the metal poles, while Ash and Brock stumbled back some. Wave after wave hit them, but even the sudden vertigo of being swung back and fourth ridiculously high up wasn't the main thing bother Ash. No, what was getting him was that it felt like something was in pain.

When the ripples stopped, Alice waited a moment before straightening up and asking, "Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah," Dawn assured her, and Brock nodded.

When Ash didn't answer, he Brock looked over at him with worry. Ash wasn't really focusing on Brock though, he didn't even notice how pale his own tanned skin had gotten, lost in thought because whatever caused that was in a lot of pain and he didn't like it at all. He wasn't the only one though, because Ria had the exact same thoughtful expression, while Pikachu's eyes darted around wildly. "Ash?"

"Huh?" Brown eyes looked up at Brock with confusion for a moment before he shook his head then smiled. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Brock nodded his head, deciding not to pry too much and just relieved that everyone was still in tact. Turning his attention to Alice, Brock asked, "What was that?"

"I'm not sure. I suppose it could have been the air currents but..." the blond woman trailed off. "It sure was strange."

That definitely was not air currents, though Ash wasn't going to point that out. He looked up at Alice again as she said, "I'm sorry if you got scared, and to make up for it, I'll give you the grand tour!"

"That would be awesome!" Dawn cheered, but then looked back at the boys. "But aren't we meeting a friend of yours there?"

"Hmm...well they could come along too," Alice replied cheerfully. "I'll set down and get everything settled while you find them. Come back and find me and I'll show you all around. Deal?"

"Sweet, beautiful Alice," Brock said dramatically. "So kind, so thoughtful, I would be honoured if you would-." Croagunk appeared and jabbed him for the second time. "Ow."

He was still on the bottom of the basket when they finally landed. Dawn kicked his leg lightly and shot Ash an exasperated look. He laughed and said, "I guess we're leaving him here."

"It's fine," Alice assured them. "Do you know where you were supposed to meet your friend?"

"Yeah, May said that she'd be at the Pokemon Center."

Alright. It's just down that road there and to the left. You can't miss it!"

"Thanks!" Ash and Dawn hurried off, both rushing through the streets without a real reason to.

"So May's a coordinator you travelled with before?" Dawn asked him curiously once they got on the busier part of the cobblestone street, unable to just recklessly run anymore.

"Yeah. She's a year older than you, and I think you guys are going to get along great," he replied happily. Honestly, Ash was excited to see his other female friend again. He got emails from her as she travelled through Johto with Solidad, Harvey and, of course, Drew. It was virtually impossible to talk to each other face to face since they were both traveling, but they could settle on the emails, occasionally with pictures or videos attached. He knew that May was doing well for herself, but it was still nice seeing friends again.

The Alamos Contest was world renown thanks to the Space-Time Towers, and coordinators flocked from all over for it. From the emails he got, it seemed like May was almost tripping over herself with excitement, even though none of her traveling companions were coming with her.

Finally, the familiar red and white sign of the Pokemon Center appeared in front of them. Ash led the way, making a mental note that he should find one of the phones to give his mother and Misty a call. That was the rule: find a pokemon center, give mom and girlfriend, a call or their combined wrath will reign down upon him for the rest of time.

Before that though, his bright brown eyes scanned the busy Pokemon Center, landing on a familiar brunette girl. She switched up her red bandana for a blue one, and her red, short-sleeved shirt was replaced with an blue sleeveless one, but she was definitely the same May he had last seen going back to Hoenn with Max.

"May!"

She whipped around, sapphire eyes looking curiously before a smile appeared on her face. "Ash!" She practically bounced forward, giving him a tight hug that made him think she was trying to strangle him. "It's been months since I last saw you! Emails and pictures don't do enough to keep in touch with friends. How have you been? Hi Pikachu! Oh, Ria! You're getting so big!" She took both Pikachu and the Riolu into her arms, hugging them.

May looked around, eyes settling on the young blue-haired girl. "Oh! You must be Dawn!" She sidestepped around Ash, still holding the two pokemon, smiling warmly at her. "My name's May Maple, and I'm a coordinator from Hoenn! It's nice to meet you!"

"Yeah I'm Dawn. Dawn Berlitz!" She held out her hand, smiling happily. "I know you! Some people in Sinnoh call you the Princess of Hoenn!" May's cheeks turned red at that as she shook Dawn's hand. "Plus Ash talks about his friends all the time. It's nice to meet you for myself though!"

May laughed happily, but then snapped her fingers. "Oh!" The very excited girl spun around to look at Ash again. "I forgot! I brought a surprise with me! For you!"

"A...surprise?" Ash sounded almost wary about that. "You shouldn't have."

A sly smirk appeared on her face as she looked over his shoulder for a moment and giggled. "I

think you're going to like this surprise though.”

“Am I?”

“Yup,” she popped the P and grinned at him like a Vulpix. Look behind you and tell me.”

Deciding to humour her, Ash looked around, expecting to see some horrible concoction of food that she made, or maybe she did end up bringing Drew or even Max with her. What he did not expect, was to turn around and look into a very familiar pair of sea green eyes.

“Hi Ash,” Misty Waterflower grinned at him. “Miss me?”

Sky

Smiles And Laughter

Ash was completely flabbergasted, and he wasn't even quite sure what that meant. He stared at Misty with a stunned expression, half believing that she was simply a mirage or something along those lines. With all the grace and poise of someone meeting their girlfriend face to face again after a few months apart, he reached out and poked her arm.

“Ow, what was that for?”

“That didn't hurt,” Ash replied, knowing that he didn't poke her that hard and she was just complaining. Despite her annoyed expression, his shock turned into a smile as he realized that it was, in fact, her. With a happy laugh, Ash reached out again this time closing the distance between them by pulled her into a tight hug. “What are you doing here? Not that I'm complaining, but what are you doing here?”

Misty's arms went around Ash, hugging him back as she pressed her face into his shoulder. She stayed like that for a moment, before peering up at a giddy May, and a rather confused Dawn. She poked Ash, who let out a sound of protest and said, “Introduce me to your friend first!”

“Fine,” Ash pulled away from her and turned so that he was standing beside her, facing Dawn and May. “Dawn, this is –.”

“Pikachupi!” Pikachu finally took the opportunity to launch himself out of May's arms, cooing happily as Misty caught him and he cuddled into her hooded, yellow tanktop.

“I missed you too, Pikachu,” she laughed, and grinned down at Ria, who walked over and looked up at her slightly shyly. “Oh come on, you remember me. Get up here.” The female pokemon squeaked and jumped up into her arms. Cuddling the two pokemon to her, she looked back at Dawn and said, “Sorry. I'm Misty Waterflower, and you're Dawn Berlitz, right? Ash talks about you all the time on the phone.”

Dawn nodded but then her smile vanished off her face for a moment, and they all stared at her. She regarded Misty with pure bewilderment as she blurted out, “Wait, as in the girlfriend Ash claimed to have, Misty Waterflower?” Startled by the question, the redhead just nodded. Dawn looked at Ash. “I thought you made her up.”

There was silence for a moment before May and Misty laughed loudly, and Ash grumbled under his breath. The girl in question patted his shoulder as she smiled at Dawn. “I can see why you'd think that.” She grinned at Ash's unimpressed look before turning her attention back to the young girl. “I assure you, I am very real. I'm the Cerulean City Gym Leader. Well, normally I am.”

“Normally you are?” Ash repeated, holding his arm out as Riolu climbed up onto Misty's shoulder than then jumped over to him.

“I'll explain in a bit. Where's Brock?” she looked around for their older friend curiously.

“We left him with Alice.”

“You left him with a girl?”

“And Croagunk.”

“The stabby one?”

“Yup.”

Dawn clapped her hands together, drawing the attention back to her, and said, “Alice offered to give us a tour around the town if you guys want. We have to go find her to get Brock back anyway. What do you say?”

“Sure, that sounds like fun,” May agreed, practically bouncing. “Oh and I can't wait for the contest. It's going to be so much fun too!”

“I know!” The two younger girls chatted animatedly as they started walking ahead of them.

“They sure took to each other quick,” Misty noted as they walked after them, Pikachu climbing up onto her shoulder. Neither one of them brought attention to the way their hands brushed against each other for a few steps before she intertwined their fingers in a tight clasp.

Ash smiled at her, but that smile quickly turned into a childish pout. “Seriously, are you going to tell me or not?”

“Fine, Mr. Impatient.” She rolled her eyes at him. “Remember when you guys first walked me back to Cerulean City? May asked why we didn't have contests there. I mentioned it to my sisters and they started watching contests to see what they were. They're actually in love with the idea, but I told them that the best coordinators also have strong, well trained pokemon. I know, manipulative of me. So they've been training theirs more because they want to set up a contest using the gym. While they trained their pokemon, I was sent away to get ideas. May was only in Johto, so I decided to go with her for a little bit. You know, just in case I needed to get home quickly. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to come here though, especially since I knew you were going to be here too.”

“Wow, so you're going to start doing contests in the gym?” He was honestly impressed, knowing just how much effort people put into not only participating in them, but getting them organized in general. There was still something he was curious about though. “How does that work? Having it in a gym?”

“We looked at League rules and regulations. It's actually highly encouraged for the the gyms to be used for other things along with the battles. So, for a week every month, the gym is going to become a contest hall.”

“Every month?”

“Yup. May told me that a place can have a contest up to every two weeks if they want. That's not going to fly with a gym though.”

“Or swim.”

“Haha you're hilarious.” She shook her head at him. “But I get a week off every month while Lily and Violet run the show with the contest, so I won't complain.”

“What about Daisy?” Ash frowned a bit, thinking about her oldest sister who was also Tracey Sketchit's girlfriend. He was much more familiar with the golden-haired Waterflower over the other two, since she was usually the one who answered the phone first when he called Misty, and she always insisted on talking for a few minutes before getting Misty. It drove him crazy half of the time, but she was actually being a good sister to the redhead, and that thought was what drove him to tolerate her.

“Well, we're still doing the productions too but they're becoming more of a specialized thing.

Daisy's in charge of that, though Violet's been helping her a lot, bouncing back and fourth between that and the contest idea. Plus, Daisy's been doing really, really well with battling lately. She's actually been taking pride in winning, and she's been incorporating what Coordinators do by not just beating the challengers, but showing off how beautiful and graceful her pokémon are as well." The pride in Misty's voice was obvious.

Though she was the youngest, Misty was easily the most mature out of the four Waterflower sisters. She was much more down to earth and practical, which was what made her a very good Gym Leader.

"Daisy is going to take over the battles for the first couple days after the contests are held too," Misty added, excitement creeping up in her voice. "That means I can get a few extra days off!"

"That's awesome, Mist!" The excitement in Ash's voice was completely genuine and almost matched hers as they followed May and Dawn around a corner. "You can get out and actually capture or study new water pokémon, not just the ones I catch and leave there! Or enter a tournament! Or do whatever you actually want to do and not feel like you're trapped!"

The corner of her lip twitched as she fought a smile, but was unable to keep it away. "Yeah, I can do all that, and I can come and visit you more often, even if you're farther away. We'll just have to plan it."

He looked a bit stunned at the thought, because it never occurred to him at all. Ash was just too excited for her to have more freedom to pursue her own dreams that he completely overlooked that. Still, the idea was very, very appealing.

"I'd like that."

She squeezed his hand. "Good. Because for some reason I can't figure out, I actually do miss having you around. Gross eating habits and all."

"I don't have gross eating habits."

"The only person who can possibly put a run to you is May."

"I am not as bad as she is."

"You are too."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

They stopped walking at some point of time, turning to face each other as they yelled back and fourth. Misty had her hands on her hips, leaning dangerously close to him as she glared and yelled, while he had his arms crossed and yelled back without backing down.

"Uh, should we stop them?" Dawn asked uncertainly as she and May came to a stop a few feet

away from them.

“I asked Brock the same thing the first time,” May shook her head. “Interrupting is horrible idea. It usually turns their anger on you. Pikachu's got this.”

“Pikachu?”

A flash of electricity surged through the air, leaving Ash and Misty in a charred pile on the ground, Ria looking on in fascination while Pikachu looked rather proud of himself.

“Should I be worried?”

“Nah,” May waved her hand, and then pointed as they pushed themselves up off of the ground. “All is good.” She was about to keep walking, but then stopped. “I have no idea where we're going.”

Dawn shook off her surprise, deciding that Ash's friends were weird, but it was a good type of weird. She laughed and lead the way, turning a corner and immediately coming to a stop. She cocked an eyebrow, blue eyes watching the scene for a moment before she asked, “Hey, Ash, did Brock even move?”

Ash, Misty and May all went over to the younger girl, all of them sighing dramatically. Alice was just finishing with her balloon, and Brock was sitting on the ground, his elbows resting on his legs while his chin was resting on his hands, a blush on his face and they could practically see hearts in his narrow eyes.

While Alice had been a good sport about Brock staying behind, she looked a little bit weirded out from the constant staring.

“Really?” Misty practically stormed over to him, since it seemed like this notorious Croagunk wasn't about to show up yet. She grabbed him by his ear, and with a howl of pain from him, dragged him away. “Seriously, Brock? Stop creeping people out! Can't leave you alone just once?”

“Wha I – Misty? What are you – I thought May was coming! Ow! Ow! Let go!”

“Uh...” Alice blinked, watching the scene with confusion.

“Ignore them,” Ash spoke up as he walked over with Dawn and May. “We had two friends show up instead of just one. This is May and that was Misty. May, this is Alice.” He'd introduce Misty when she got back from telling off Brock.

“It's nice to meet you,” Alice said to the brunette. “Are you here for the contest too?”

At the mention of the contest, May practically bounced up to her. “Yeah! I walked by the towers earlier and it looks like it's going to be amazing!”

While they chattered, Dawn made a confused sound, and Ash looked down at her. She blinked her big blue eyes at him with a childish innocence that reminded him that she was only ten, even if she often had an air of maturity about her. “Aren't you going to introduce Misty as your girlfriend?”

Ash chuckled a little bit and shrugged. “Why would I? She is, but that's not what...” He trailed off, trying to figure out exactly what he wanted to say. “Misty's more than that! She's one of my best friends and an awesome Gym Leader!” He pumped his fist. “That's what she should be known as first! The things that make her unique, not me!”

Dawn seemed to think about that for a moment before smiling broadly. "I like that answer!" She sound oddly encouraged by it for reasons that he couldn't comprehend.

"I do too." He looked around at Misty as she came back with Brock, both of them smiling at him. Misty, he understood, because she probably heard the compliments, but Brock just seemed so proud that it confused him.

Before he could ask, Alice and May came back up to them. Once Misty was properly introduced, Alice clapped her hands and said, "So, who's ready for a tour?"

"I'll go anywhere with you, my dear!"

Misty cleared her throat and held up her fingers in a pinching motion.

"Uh...I mean...lead the way."

...

The Space-Time Towers seemed to loom over them no matter where they were within the massive town. It wasn't a bad thing, just strange.

Outside of the towers, everything was decorated for the upcoming contest. There were colourful lanterns strung from post to post in every street, with people milling about and having pokemon balls on the cobblestone road. There wasn't a car in sight, and Alice explained that it was impossible to get one to Alamos Town anyway.

"Look at them all," Ash had his pokedex out, scanning each and every pokemon that he didn't know, and even some that he did just to unlock the data into his Sinnoh pokedex, since the information didn't transfer over unless he actually owned the pokemon, and even then, only that form. Emergency information such as types of poisons, bites and cures were always accessible, but unlocking the information showed how many pokemon they saw. It was almost like a challenge. One that he usually won in the past, when his pokdex was compared to others who got theirs around the same time.

"Pi pikachu!"

"Rio ri lu!" They both pointed at something eagerly.

Ash looked up from his pokedex, curious to see what got their attention and then grinned. "Cotton candy!"

Alice laughed and said, "The contest is a huge deal here, and we always have a festival the week it's happening too. You'll find all kinds of vendors with different food everywhere."

"Alright!" Ash and May yelled at the same time, sprinting forward eagerly.

Brock laughed and said, "They're going to eat us out of all our spending money."

"Oh, I can cover it, it's no big deal," Alice assured him with a laugh.

"Don't tell them that," both Misty and Brock warned her together. Brock looked at Dawn and warned her, "You know how much Ash eats? May is just as bad." Dawn made a face at that.

"Come on guys!" May yelled over to them while waving her hand. She spun around to look at the cotton candy cart. "There are even different flavours! I don't know which one to try!"

“All of them!” Ash pumped his fist and Pikachu let out a cry of agreement while Ria just looked on in confusion. Ash looked at the small Riolu. “Oh, you never had cotton candy before, did you? You'll like it!” He dug in his pocket for his own money, counting out the correct change for the largest size as May started going through her own pack.

Ash pulled a small piece off of the stick to hold out to Riolu, only slightly aware that Brock, Dawn, Misty and Alice had all come over to the cart as well to get a snack. Ria sniffed it unsurely, but she could feel Ash's encouragement and his optimism, so she took a bite. Almost immediately, Ash felt a small wave of happiness that had absolutely nothing to do with himself rushed through him.

'It's good.'

He chuckled a bit and nodded his head as he took a bite, giving Pikachu a bite as well.

“Hey,” Alice spoke up, drawing his attention. “Do you guys want to go see the square in front of the Space-Time Towers? They usually have pokemon battles there as people prepare for the contest.”

“Yeah!” Misty and May were there, he had cotton candy, his pokemon were happy, and he could find a good battle. It was turning out to be a great day.

...

“Ash!”

Laughter escaped the young teenager's lips as he bolted ahead of everyone else, specifically Brock's flailing arms. It wasn't his fault that Brock was too busy drooling over Alice to pay attention to his cotton candy, and Ria really wanted some more. He couldn't deny the little pokemon that, could he? He also couldn't leave Pikachu out if he gave some to Ria, and he himself was hungry.

Next time Brock should just pay more attention to his surroundings.

As he ran forward without looking, Ash could feel something huge walk in front of him and he came stumbling to a stop, but because of the cobblestone roads, he still ended up smacking right into a huge, green and brown pokemon, dropping the stick from his cotton candy onto the ground. He shook his head slightly, not quite sure how he had missed the huge pokemon's presence a few seconds sooner.

“You told me I gotta practice my aura, so you do too.”

Pikachu laughed and Ash glanced over at Ria, who seemed slightly smug. “Don't be like that.”

It was true though, he did tell the small Riolu that she had to practice to control her aura, so he probably should do that a little more than he did. Professor Oak told him to be very cautious about who he let know about his incredibly rare ability, and as much as Ash liked Dawn, the younger girl could get overexcited or angry at times, and things would just come pouring out. It was because of that, and because he knew that they were always being followed by Team Rocket, that he decided to keep the fact that he could use aura very hushed. If he didn't pick up on this thing right away though, he was definitely slipping a little bit.

“Sorry about that,” Ash said directly to the pokemon. He looked up at the teenager who was polishing the pokemon's back, laughing sheepishly.

“It's okay,” the brunet assured him, assuming that Ash was talking to him. “I just asked him to

move so I could get this part of his shell polished. I didn't see you coming either.”

“Pi pikachu!” Pikachu jumped onto the pokemon's back and waved, to which it smiled at him.

“Tor toterra.”

“Torterra?” Ash took out his pokedex and scanned it.

“Torterra, the Continent Pokemon. In ancient times, people imaged that beneath the ground, a gigantic Torterra dwelled. Groups of this pokemon migrating in search of water have been mistaken for a 'moving forrest'.”

Ash hit another button to make some more information pop up. “Grass and ground type and the final form of Turtwig. Hey, that's cool.” He put his pokedex back into his pocket and reached to his belt and tossed his own pokeball up into the air, releasing his Turtwig (after making sure that Ria was sitting on top of his head, so Turtwig wouldn't latch on). “Look Turtwig, you'll be big like this guy some day.”

Turtwig observed the evolved form and puffed himself up a bit as if trying to make himself bigger. It didn't really do any good.

“You're taking really good care of him,” the teenager observed. “You can tell from his bright colouring.” He straightened himself up. “I'm Maury. It's nice to meet you.”

“I'm Ash, and these are my partners, Pikachu, Turtwig, and Ria.”

“You must be here for the contest.”

“No, two of my friends are though. I'm a trainer.”

“A trainer, huh? Well then, my friends and I have been looking for some people to have a battle with, to get our pokemon warmed up for the contest. Think you or any of your friends would be interested?”

Ash's eyes lit up excitedly and he said, “You bet I will! And some of them probably will too! Wait here!” He called Turtwig back, making sure he had Pikachu and Ria before he dashed back to where he had lost the others, finding them all still talking to one another excitedly. Well, Brock was almost fawning over Alice, while Dawn seemed to be rapid-firing questions at Misty and May.

“Hey!” Ash threw his hands up into the air. “I found someone who wants to battle, and two of his friends are looking for people to battle against too. Some of you guys must be interested!”

“I'm in!” Misty was quick to say. “My pokemon feel like they've been out of practice lately, so they could use a battle.”

“I think we should let Brock do it,” May suggested while nudging Dawn playfully.

Dawn leaned back and looked around her, at Alice's uncomfortable expression. She laughed and said, “Definitely.” The excited girl practically jumped on the spot. “Come on lets go! I'd love to see your pokemon in action, Misty!” The two older girls had taken the time to tell Dawn about their pokemon, and while she would see some of May's in the contest, she really did want to see some of Misty's too.

“Well you guys are doing that,” Alice spoke up, “I'm going to go check on a few things, okay?”

“But—but Alice, you can't—” Misty grabbed Brock's ear and started pulling him away the second that Croagunk appeared. The poison-type tilted his head slightly before nodding in approval and following along.

“Alright! We'll be in front of the towers!” Ash waved at Alice, completely ignoring Misty and Brock. “Come on, lets go.” He looked around and May and Dawn. “Come on, I think they're coordinators, so you can see some of the competition.”

“And we can discuss our costumes!”

“Yeah!” Dawn grinned broadly at May.

Sending them both slightly annoyed looks, Ash shook his head and in a dry tone, said, “I guess there's that too.”

It didn't take them long to get back to where Ash left Maury, and when they did, they found a red-haired woman and a black-haired man waiting there. Almost immediately, Brock seemed to melt at the sight of the woman, but with Misty on one side of him and Croagunk on the other, he dared not move.

“Hey Maury! This is Misty and Brock, and they both agreed to battle. These two here are May and Dawn, and they're competing in the contest,” Ash introduced.

“That's great,” he motioned to his friends. “This is Kai and Allegra.” Kai observed them thoughtfully, running his fingers through his beard while Allegra tossed a pokeball up and down.

“Pip?” For the first time that day, Piplup popped out of Dawn's bag, haven been asleep the entire time. She had complained about the water-type being impossible to wake when it didn't want to get up before, but Ash had never seen it last through so much drama.

“Aww, what a cutie,” Misty gushed, almost starry-eyed at the Sinnoh water starter.

“Like water types, huh?” Kai spoke up curiously.

“You bet! I'm the Cerulean City Gym Leader in Kanto,” Misty's awe quickly changed into pride as she straightened herself up. “I'm one of the best!”

He laughed and said, “Well then, I challenge you to a battle.” He released his pokemon, a tall Empoleon.

“And I'd be honoured to battle you,” Brock spoke to Allegra, stars in his eyes. “I've seen you in magazines before as one of the top rising coordinators in Sinnoh.”

“Well, at least you have good taste,” she laughed and released her Infernape.

Ash and Dawn both pulled out their own pokedex to scan them.

“Infernape, the Flame Pokemon. It's crown of fire is indicative of it's fiery nature. It is beaten by none in terms of quickness and uses unique fighting moves with the fire on its hands and feet. It will take on any opponent.”

Just like with Torterra, and went into the extra information. “Fire and fighting-type. Final evolution of Chimchar.”

“Empoleon, the Emperor Pokemon. It swims as fast as a jet boat. If anyone were to hurt its pride, it

would slash them with wings that can cleave through an ice floe. The three horns that extend from its beak attest to its power.”

Dawn looked over at Ash's pokedex curiously. “How do you get it to show you that extra information?”

He was a bit startled that she didn't know how, but he realized that she never really had to yet. Most of the time they'd both scan a pokemon and he'd ramble off the new information first. “This button here.”

She pressed the button he indicated, and smiled when the information came up. “Thanks! Lets see, Empoleon is a dual water and steel-type. Oh! It's the final form of Piplup!”

“Pip?” The little pokemon jumped out of her bag and walked up to the Empoleon, glaring up at it after a moment.

Dawn laughed as she put her pokedex away. “Come on Mr. Fiesty Pants, Misty's gonna battle that one and we're going to watch. Oh, I suppose I never introduced you guys, huh? Since someone was being lazy.” She scooped Piplup into her arms and pointed at the two girls. “This is May and Misty, and they're our new friends.”

“Such a cutie.”

“I know!”

Piplup seemed unsure at first, but when they both cooed over him, he nodded his head with approval.

“One on one battles?” Maury asked Ash.

“Lets do it.” Pikachu was about to run forward but Ash laughed. “No bud, get back here. You're an electric-type, and while I know we have some tricks to deal with ground-types, you gotta give the others a chance too.”

“Pika chu,” Pikachu sighed dramatically and went behind Ash. Ria jumped off of his shoulder giggling, and Pikachu playfully smacked her with his tail.

“You ready?” Kai asked Misty.

“You bet!”

“Don't expect me to go easy on you!” Allegra yelled to Brock, who just blushed and swooned.

“This should be fun,” May said to Dawn as the two both made themselves comfortable, sitting on the ground. Dawn nodded her head in agreement, watching as the battles began.

“Lets go, Staravia!” His Sinnoh flying type circled in the air, staring down at its opponent, almost quivering at the thought of being chosen. If there was one thing this pokemon loved, it was a good battle.

“That's smart. But we'll see how good you are,” Maury said, sounding honestly impressed.

Ash knew what he was thinking, it was what most older trainers thought when dealing with him. Maybe he wasn't the smartest person in the world, or even out of his small group of friends, but he had been training his pokemon since he was ten, and he did know a thing or two about battling. He

also knew that type match-ups weren't everything, and was actually known for not really sticking to them, but most of his pokemon were still fairly new, and if he wanted them to grow and get stronger, he had to start with the basics.

“Torterra! Bullet Seed!”

“Dodge it with Agility!” Ash cheered for his flying pokemon as it managed to fly quickly enough to avoid them. “Alright Staravia! Get 'em with Aerial Ace!” The bird let out a loud sound and then streaked towards the Torterra, crashing into it and sending it flying.

Ash covered his face as dust flew everywhere, but he didn't need to look up to know that this battle had ended before it even really started. Staravia was exhausted, haven given his all in that single attack (he really needed to work on that), and Torterra was in pain.

He looked up and saw Maury move to his pokemon's side. He let out a sigh before he laughed and said, “You have one strong Staravia, you must have had him for a while now.”

“Not really,” Ash said with a laugh. “We've just been doing a lot of training. Thanks buddy, you did a more than amazing job.”

Staravia puffed his chest up as he landed, laughing with both Pikachu and Ria as they came over.

“I'm a coordinator before a competitive battler,” Maury explained sheepishly. “We've been focusing so much on our attack moves and making them look good, that we've been slacking off on our defence. You did a good job, we just weren't ready for that strong of an attack that you were super weak against.” He petted Torterra before putting him back into his pokeball. “You were probably looking for a better battle than that.”

He was disappointed, but Ash decided not to tell him that since he knew the outcome was more sheer luck than anything else. He needed to teach Staravia to not put everything into a single attack to exhaust himself. It was luck that he hit Torterra in the right spot, because if the pokemon wouldn't have went down, Staravia would have been too tired to really battle properly.

Ash just smiled and shrugged. “It's no big deal.” He turned to watch the other two battles, both of which were proving to be much more interesting than his own.

...

“Lets go Pol –.” Misty cut herself off when another pokeball opened, revealing a yellow-feathered creature. “Ugh, Psyduck!” She glared at her pokemon heatedly, but he just held his head and tilted it, staring up at her with a blank stare. “Fine, I can't call you back yet. We're going to battle this guy.”

Psyduck looked around at Empoleon. “Psy?”

Misty slapped her hand to her face. “Seriously?”

Kai laughed and asked, “Is there a problem?”

“No. No lets go Psyduck!”

Psyduck waddled over to Empoleon and stared up at him. Empoleon stared down menacingly, pulling himself to his full height. Psyduck stared blankly, tilting his head and trying to look up at his opponent, only to flail backwards and flip over himself.

“Ugh,” Misty slapped her face again. “You just had to come out of your pokeball.”

...

“You're up, Croagunk!” Brock's poison-type leapt out in front of him, staring at the tall Infernape with a shudder of anticipation. “Ladies first!”

“Oh no, I insist!” Allegra called back to him. “Show me what you got, hot shot.”

It was kind of funny that someone was referring to him as 'hot shot', because he was used to people calling Ash things like that. Well, he'd show her what he could do. “Fine then. Start with Poison Jab!”

“Dodge it!”

Croagunk was obviously faster than Allegra and Infernape thought. His jabs came quickly and rapidly, forcing the fire-type to duck and dodge out of the barrage of poisonous jabs.

“Counter it with Mach Punch!”

“Jump into the air to dodge it!”

Croagunk just barely manage to scrape getting hit as he sprang up and somersaulted midair, landing back away from the flame pokemon.

“Nice trick but I've got some nice ones too. Use Flamethrower!”

“Dodge it!” Croagunk jumped into the air to dodge again, but the fire kept going. Brock let out a yelp as he just barely dodged it himself. “I'm getting rusty.”

The two pokemon landed not very far from each other, and instead of using an attack, they both began sparring, trading and dodging the punches and hits that defined their common secondary type. Infernape managed to get in one very powerful Mach Punch though, slamming Croagunk into the cobblestone hard enough to actually shatter it.

“Croagunk!” Brock rushed to his pokemon's side, sighing when he saw that it was clearly knocked out. “You did your best, now get some rest.” He put him back into his pokeball and smiled at Allegra. “Good battle!”

“It was!” She agreed with a grin. “You're a good trainer, and if you had him a little longer, you probably would have beaten me. I hope we get to battle sometime in the future again.”

Brock's face cheeks flushed red and a lovesick, dazed look appeared on his face. “I'm sure we will.”

“Hey!” He jumped as May appeared at his side, giving him a stern look. “Just because Croagunk's out and Misty's distracted doesn't give you free reign, mister. I'll drag you by your ear too!”

“You've been hanging out with Misty too much,” Brock said with a defeated sigh.

May grinned at him. “She has been traveling with me through Johto for a little bit. Her sisters want her to research contests, so she thought tagging with me would be best. Then she gets the whole inside experience.”

“Ah, now that makes sense. Misty mentioned that she was with you, but she didn't say why, now I get why she was interested in coming here.” He paused for a moment before looking over towards

Ash (who was still talking to Maury animatedly) with a sly expression. "Amongst other things."

May giggled at him and turned around to watch the last of Misty's battle.

...

"Come on Psyduck!" Misty called out to her pokemon. She had him for a very long time now, and she knew that he could use very powerful attacks if he was prompted to.

"Looks like it could use some more training. Use Ice Beam!"

"Run from it!" He just managed to run, his arms flailing in the air. "Ugh, really." Misty let out a light growl, her eyes glancing over towards the light post not far from her. "Psyduck, hit the lamppost with your head!"

"Huh?" Kai was obviously startled by her decision.

Psyduck chose not to question it though, rushing full force and slamming his head against the metal post. He cringed in pain and held his head, but when his eyes opened, they were glowing blue.

"Alright! Use Confusion!"

"Empoleon! Use Peck!"

Psyduck's eyes started to glow brightly as Empoleon rushed at him. Just before he was about to hit, a confused look appeared on his face and he ended up stumbling around him and crashing face first into the ground, the reverberations knocking the yellow pokemon off of his feet.

"Psyduck, get up and hit it with Psychic!" Misty pumped her fist and pointed at the dazed and confused pokemon. Once again, his eyes surged blue, but this time Empoleon was lifted off of the ground. Psyduck started spinning him around and around, until he crashed into the ground, knocked out. "Yes!"

Misty rushed over to her pokemon, lifting him off of the ground. "Good job you goofy thing. Looks like you're not useless."

"Psy?"

She sighed. "Just get back in your pokeball." Once he was securely away (for now) she looked over at Kai. "Is Empoleon okay?"

"He's great. That was an awesome battle."

"You gave Psyduck a headache on purpose!" Misty jumped a bit and looked around at Dawn, who was staring at her with wide eyes. "That was so cool and smart!"

"I've had him for a long time," she laughed. "Some people might find that mean, but you just need to know your pokemon. My Psyduck's pretty...unique." That was the nicest way that she could say he was the dumbest one she ever met, plus he still couldn't swim even though he was a water-type. "It doesn't always work."

"Well, we picked up a couple tips from this, right Piplup?"

"Piplup!" The pokemon waved at Misty, who cooed and petted him.

"From you too, Kai," Dawn grinned up at the man. "It was so awesome seeing an Empoleon in

action!”

“Well, you'll have one too someday,” Kai said, laughing a bit as Piplup tried to peck his fingers when he reached out to touch him. “A feisty one.”

“Oh, that's because Piplup doesn't want to evolve,” Dawn explained. “I thought that was a bit strange, but knowing that there are others, like Ash's Pikachu, made me realize it wasn't that weird.”

“Dawn! Misty!” Both girls looked around at May's voice. She was standing with Ash, Brock and Alice, waving at them. “Come on! Alice has something she wants to show us!”

“Coming! It was nice to meet you!” Dawn waved at Kai as she hurried off.

“Thanks for the battle!” Misty added as she rushed after her, feeling exhilarated. Traveling with May around Johto was fun, but it had been a while since he actually battled, and even longer than she battled someone who was more than just a novice. She couldn't, and didn't want to, wipe the smile off of her face as she rushed over to the others, looping her arm with Ash's. Yes, it was a very good day.

Sky

A Sign

They left the stone houses of the town behind, traveling down the cobblestone road as more and more trees surrounded them until they reached a winding, stone staircase that made it easy for travellers to make it down the steep, grassy hill. With the sun shining brightly, the air warmed with a light breeze, it was an absolutely perfect day.

“It's beautiful here,” May said in awe, looking around at the stairs and the view of the Space-Time Towers from where they were standing at the bottom. Her sapphire eyes lit up happily, and she tossed a pokeball up into the air. “Eevee, come look!”

“Ve?” the little brown pokemon tilted her head curiously, closing her eyes and breathing in the air. Eevee thrilled happily at the environment before turning to look at the other pokemon that were there curiously. Almost mirroring May's expression, her eyes lit up when she spotted Pikachu and Ria, bounding over to them with excitement.

“Come out, Azurill!” Misty tossed up her pokeball, and the small, blue pokemon appeared, bouncing on her large, round tail happily. She greeted Eevee with an air of familiarity, they were traveling together after all, and squeaked happily when she saw Pikachu and Ria. The pokemon all chattered to themselves, no doubt introducing Dawn's Piplup and Alice's Chimchar.

“It is beautiful,” Alice agreed with May's earlier statement. “This has to be my favourite place in Alamos Town.” She motioned to a stone-lined, manmade rivers. It was so quiet there that it was easy to hear a few of the running fountains, as opposed to the hustle and bustle of the town. It was easy to see why Alice liked it so much.

Chimchar, Pikachu, Ria, Piplup, Eevee and Azurill all rushed down in front of their trainers to look at the water. All of the pokemon seemed completely fascinated by something there.

“Pika pika, pikachupi!” Pikachu called out to Misty.

She looked at him curiously before glancing over at Ash. He laughed and let go of her hand. “He wants you to go and look at something.”

While Misty understood her pokemon fairly well, she never understood how Ash was basically able to translate everything Pikachu said without hesitation, especially since he wasn't just making it up by guessing, he was legitimately right about it. She shook her head, not wanting to think about that because trying to figure out how Ash Ketchum's mind worked would only lead to headaches.

Walking over to the water, she looked down and instantly her eyes went wide with excitement. “Oh wow! Those pokemon are beautiful! What are they?”

“Finneon and Lumineon,” Alice told her without even looking. “We have a whole school that lives here because it's illegal to capture pokemon within the town walls. They're usually found in salt water, but these ones have adapted. Pokemon are truly amazing.”

“They are,” Misty agreed with an almost wistful tone as she knelt down beside the water, reaching in and smiling as one of the pokemon brushed against her hand.

Ash observed her silently before he smiled. One thing that they agreed on was that he'd tell her all about the water pokemon that he saw, catch them if he could since all of his were actually staying with her at her gym now so that she could study and take care of them. His water-types were almost like shared pokemon, minus the fact that she couldn't actually use them in official Gym

Battles. Misty wouldn't have the chance to explore to find one, but he would, and Ash was going to catch a Finneon for her. He already decided on it, and when he got an idea in his head, it was very hard to make him change his mind.

Once they pried her away from the water, Alice led them along the cobblestone sidewalk, surrounded by rows of trees. The blond tour guide smiled at them and said, "You know, this whole place was designed by Godey."

"Really?" Brock asked as he started digging through his bag for his tour guide again.

"Who's Godey?" May asked him.

"Only one of the most celebrated architects of his time," Brock answered her before even finding the page. "My grandfather's design for the Pewter Gym was actually inspired by him. I'm not sure how, it's not nearly as impressive as any of this, not even close, but still, I grew up hearing stories about his impressive Space-Time Towers." Finally, he got to the page he was looking for and started reading. "The design theme for brilliant architect Godey's garden is the balance between humans and pokemon."

If Brock had more to read, he never got the chance. Misty let out a scream, startling all of them as she hid behind Ash, holding onto the back of his black and yellow vest tightly. When they were younger, she would still hide behind him at times, even if she had been quite a bit taller, but now that they were the same height, and he was a bit broader than her, she had no problem using him as a human shield.

"What's wrong?" Dawn asked with alarm while the pokemon were instantly on high alert.

Ash sighed and looked out at the manmade river before looking at Brock. Brock followed his gaze, looked back and sighed. Then, both of them looked at the redhead with pointedly, identical expressions that could only be translated as 'really?' on their faces. May suddenly burst into laughter as she caught on. "Misty, it's just a Beautifly!"

"No it's not! I can deal with a Beautifly! But those...things..." She shuddered as she glared at the Yanma and Yanmega as they flew close to them, as well as a few of the Combee.

Dawn blinked, looking at them all with confusion before saying, "That's just a Combee. They're kinda cute." Misty glared at her from over Ash's shoulder. "Okay, they're not?" Dawn was a bright girl, and she could instantly pick up on what Ash, Brock and everyone else had learned over the years: hell hath no fury like Misty when bug pokemon are around.

"She doesn't like bug pokemon," May explained with a giggle. "It's not just the Combee." She smiled broadly at Misty, who just glared back.

"Hey," Ash glanced back at her, a mischievous grin appearing on his face. "Remember that time when we were younger, and you thought Brock said something about bug pokemon being around, and you jumped onto my back?"

"Shut up." She squeezed his arm tightly, and silently vowed revenge on Brock as he laughed loudly at the memory.

Alice regarded them all for a moment before saying, "There are less bug-types this way. Come on."

The cobblestone trailed off to a worn path within the garden, slabs of stone lining the way so people wouldn't get lost in the paths of ledges, flowers and stonework.

They were all startled as a Shinx and Luxio ran out of the bushes, running around Alice's legs. An Azurill, a Marill and an Azumarill bounced out, all crowding around the blond until the little Azurill caught sight of Misty's. It bounced over and greeted the other one cheerfully.

Shinx jumped in front of Pikachu, bowing down its upper body and wriggling its behind. Pikachu immediately jumped on all fours, a playful smile on his face as the Shinx started running and he ran after it. The other pokemon took their queue from those two, and soon, Ria, Azurill, Eevee, Piplup and Chimchar were playing with the pokemon that lived in the garden.

Ash took a step forward when he saw the little Riolu trip, but the Luxio came to a stop and helped her up again before they both started running. That still didn't stop him from being worried. Sure, he had Ria the Riolu for a few months now, but she was forced to hatch before she was meant to, and was smaller than most Riolu at that age. He cared about every single one of his pokemon, but he couldn't help but be a bit overprotective of her.

May nudged his side and said, "Look at you, acting all worried. Almost like a grown-up."

"Hey," he laughed and tugged at her light brown hair, not bothered at all as she slapped his hand away, "I am grown-up compared to you."

May raised an eyebrow at him, sending him a disbelieving look. Ash could admit that there were times when her maturity seemed to greatly surpass his own, hell, there were times when Dawn could do the same and she was four years younger than him, but he looked at both girls as younger sisters, and it was his job to help them and guide them, just like Brock and Misty (though she had just left home too when he met her) had helped him.

"All of the pokemon here are really tame," Alice assured them. "Riolu will be okay. I've been coming to this garden since I was little, and all the pokemon here are my friends."

Ash contemplated that for a moment before his expression brightened. "Alright!" He took out three other pokeballs and tossed them into the air, revealing Staravia, Turtwig and Aipom. "You guys can come out and enjoy the nice day too."

Dawn perked up, pulling her pokeballs out of her bag. "That's a great idea! Come on out!"

"I'm in too!" Brock agreed.

"Me too!" May added.

Misty nodded her head, then paused and said, "Well, almost everyone."

Pokeballs flew high into the air, followed by streams of light. Dawn released the three other pokemon she had with her: Buizel, Pachirisu and Buneary. Brock released Sudowoodo, Croagunk and his Happiny.

May released Ivysaur, Beautifly, Wartortle and Munchlax, leaving her Blaziken in his pokeball. It wasn't that she didn't want him to come out, but before meeting up with Ash earlier, she and Misty had a battle to pass the time, and Blaziken could still use the rest.

Likewise, Misty released Psyduck, Politoed and Corsola. Staryu was still tired from the battle, and there's no way Gyarados could play around there with everyone else.

The pokemon all took off running down the stone paths, going through an opening where a large fountain-like, manmade stream was. The water types all happily jumped in to swim while the others ran around the edges.

Instead of following the pokemon directly, they all walked down a path and through different parts of the gardens. They went through decorated archways, staring in awe at the flowers and vines that surrounded them.

Suddenly, a small pokemon appeared in front of them. Ash came to a startled stop, but then laughed as it popped back up into the plants above them. "A Burmy!"

"It must be their way of welcoming us," Brock noted cheerfully as they continued to pop up in front of them then go back up into the plants.

Misty recoiled, her nails digging into Ash's arm painfully. He let out an annoyed sound. "Those are grass-types."

"No, those are bugs," her voice wavered and she stared at him as if he was insane.

"Mist, just think they're grass."

"Don't lie to me Ash Ketchum!"

"Fine," he threw his free arm up into the air with exasperation, "ignore the fact that I'm trying to help."

"I think they're adorable," May said as she tickled one, laughing as it laughed back at her.

"Come on, there are probably lots of bugs here, don't let it bother you! Just look at how beautiful this place is! Besides, if they get too close, we can help!" Dawn gave Misty a thumbs up. "No need to worry!"

Misty regarded the cheerful girl for a moment before sighing and then smiling at her. "Alright. Lets catch up with those pokemon before they get in all kinds of trouble!"

The five of them hurried after Alice, who kept going and was waiting on the edge of a balcony that overlooked the lake all the small streams went out into. The whole area was surrounded by tall mountains with icy peaks, and with the blue sky, the bright vegetation and the sparkling blue water, it was an amazing sight to behold.

"Okay, maybe this place isn't so bad," Misty finally agreed, holding onto the back of Ash's vest as he leaned dangerously far over the ledge where Brock had pointed something out.

"Even with the bug pokemon?" May teased her, moving closer to Dawn as she mimicked Ash's movements, though because of her smaller frame, she had to lean over even more. Dawn was short and thin, so May would have no issues yanking her back over in case she leaned too far.

"Well..." she shrugged. "I guess."

Without warning, there was a sudden blast of blue electricity, and spurts of water, ice and fire. They all jerked back, looking around at the pokemon who had been playing peacefully on the little playground there.

Ash's first instinct was that Team Rocket was there, and it was really too nice of a day to deal with them (he didn't need his aura to tell him that they were probably lurking somewhere nearby). Instead, almost all of the pokemon were facing each other, glaring. The older pokemon all just watched on with confusion, while Pikachu and Chimchar seemed to be trying to calm everyone down.

Pachirisu just ran in confusing circles.

“Knock it off!” Ash yelled at his pokemon angrily, hurrying down the stairs. He projected the anger through his aura, like how he was working on silently sending his thoughts to his partners during a battle. It must have worked, because Turtwig, Aipom and Staravia were quick to back away from the angry group of pokemon. Pikachu was still trying to calm them down though, while Ria just watched on with confusion.

“Stop fighting!” Dawn ordered her pokemon, though they didn't even give her a second glance. She puffed her cheeks out angrily as she hurried after Ash, yelling again since it really only seemed to be her pokemon and the ones from the garden now.

The sound of a leaf whistle broke through the chaos, and almost immediately, the pokemon all stopped fighting and glaring at one another, turning to the source of the music instead.

“Huh?” Ash looked at them all with a bit of confusion, because it wasn't just that they stopped fighting, they seemed to become incredibly peaceful and relaxed all together.

“How can a leaf whistle do this?” May asked, tilting her head curiously.

“I'm more curious about how you play a leaf,” Misty admitted. While she heard of it before, she had never actually seen anyone play one before. The last time an instrument confused her so much was back in the Orange Islands when she met Melody, who played an ocarina.

The first time that Alice showed them that she could play the leaf whistle, Ash had noticed how a group of Pidgey really seemed to like the song, but how that he was just standing on solid ground, he could feel something strange. Moments before, he could feel negativity coming from the pokemon, but it was almost like the music itself was changing the energy around them into something much more positive.

“What a beautiful song,” Dawn spoke up as Alice finished, dropping the leaf and letting it flutter down the water.

“My grandmother taught it to me,” Alice replied with a happy laugh.

“It was so moving!” Brock cried out as he clapped his hands together, staring at her with hearts in his eyes.

“That's saying something,” Ash mumbled as Alice grinned at them happily. “Oof.” He glared at Misty, rubbing the side that she nudged roughly.

“Oh!” Alice laughed suddenly. “I just thought of something! Wait here, I'll be right back.” She hurried away down a different set of stairs.

“Wonder what that was about,” May asked curiously, sapphire eyes watching the young woman retreat.

“Who knows,” Dawn shrugged as she turned to face her. “What do you think of Alamos Town so far?”

“It's really nice!” The brunette replied happily. “Sinnoh seems like a nice place anyway on the flight over, but it's really nice here. I can't wait for the contest!”

“It's going to be so much fun!” Dawn agreed.

“Spirited, isn't she?” Misty asked Brock as the two, young Coordinators started rambling on about different techniques.

“Dawn? That's one way to describe her,” Brock said with a laugh.

“Gal! Gallade!” They turned around as a tall pokemon landed not far from them, looking around them with confusion. It sighed and looked at them. “Gal!”

Ash concentrated, trying to feel what the pokemon wanted. At first, all he got was an anxious feeling, but then there was a little bit of intent. Something was very, very wrong and it was looking for help. “Something's wrong.”

The Gallade perked up at having been understood. It took a few steps away from them but then looked back expectantly.

“Gotta go guys!” Ash called out to his pokemon, calling all of them except for Pikachu into their pokeballs, including Ria. Whatever was going on had to be bad to worry such an obviously powerful pokemon, and he didn't want the baby pokemon exposed to that, choosing to take her anger instead.

Everyone else followed suit, but Brock stopped to look at the confused Chimchar. “You guys go! I'll wait for Alice to come back!”

Gallade jumped up all the stairs in one go, and they hurried after him. None of them were really sure where they were going or what they were looking for, but when Gallade came to a stop and pointed at something, it was obvious.

Neither Ash, Dawn, May nor Misty were from Alamos Town, but all of them were positive that polished, stone columns weren't supposed to be twisted and melted. One was even twisted almost upside down. Ash knelt down in front of them, reaching out to touch it. When he did, he felt a spark or something shoot up his arm. The energy, the aura around it felt really, really strange. He had come across his fair share of strangeness before, but since he unlocked his ability to be able to actually feel these things himself, he had never come across something like this before.

“What could have done that?” May wondered.

“If it was broken, I'd say a pokemon but...” Dawn shrugged before looking at Misty. “Could a fire-type have done it?”

“No. It would have eventually shattered it. The rock wouldn't have done this. It's like something picked up the stone and twisted it like it was putty,” the redhead noted with a furrowed brow.

“So, what could have done this?” May repeated her earlier question, sapphire eyes scanning the area around her as if the answer would just walk out of the bushes.

“It was Darkrai.”

The deep voice startled all four of them, and Ash instantly scrambled to his feet, moving himself in front of Dawn and May instinctively. He wasn't the only one though, Misty did the exact same thing, like a couple of overprotective parents. Ash wanted to shove Misty behind him too, but he had little doubt that if something came at them, she could easily defend herself. May and Dawn weren't completely helpless either, but they were both younger than him and if he could protect them, he would.

A man walked out of a tunnel surrounded by shrubs. He was wearing a strange red shirt with

golden tassels and sashes, tight white pants and white riding boots. His salmon hair was slicked up and back, and though Ash could actually feel the arrogance seeping off of him, he really didn't need to feel it to know that it was there.

“Darkrai?” Dawn repeated slowly as she peered around Misty's shoulder.

“Yes. It appears there have been recent sightings in town.”

Clearly this person didn't realize that they weren't from town. No one was really quite sure what to say to this pompous man, and no one did say anything until May sharply poked Ash's back.

“Uh, excuse me?” Ash asked slowly. “Who's Darkrai?” The name didn't ring a bell to him at all. He figured that either it was a person with a weird name, or a more likely, a pokemon, but he didn't know a thing about it.

The man didn't even look at them as he put his foot on top of the bent column and said, “The pokemon that wreaked this havoc.”

The four of them exchanged confused looks because that didn't answer their question in the least.

The sound of rushed footsteps drew their attention, and all four looked around to see Brock and Alice running towards them. They both came to a stop and Alice gasped at the twisted stone. “Alberto, what happened?”

“As I was just telling these peasants –.”

“Peasants?” Misty burst out, but was completely ignored.

“– The pokemon, Darkrai, is responsible for this mess.”

It wasn't Alice, but Brock that reacted to the name. “I've heard of Darkrai before.”

“You have?”

Brock nodded his head, a solemn look on his face. “Darkrai is a legendary pokemon said to come from Sinnoh, but a lot of people still know the stories everywhere. I'm not surprised that your parents didn't tell you about it though. I think it's supposed to represent the New Moon or something like that - “

“Oh! And Cresselia represents the full moon!” Dawn exclaimed excitedly before blushing. “Sorry, I've just heard a lot of good things about Cresselia. How she brings good dreams.”

Brock nodded his head. “That's okay, because it furthers my point. Darkrai is said to make a person have nightmares. Most cases, people are trapped in their nightmares for only a short amount of time, but it varies. In the worst cases that were said to because by him, the victim is trapped in their nightmares and it ends up killing them. Parents often use it as a cautionary story, saying if good kids don't listen, Darkrai will visit them in their sleep.”

“That's horrible,” Misty said to him. “What was wrong with your parents.”

“Actually, my Uncle Brim used to tell me that.”

“So your whole family is messed up?”

Ash shook his head at them and was about to ask a question when he felt another person coming towards them. Well, sort of. This person was traveling very slowly through the woods, but he

didn't get the sense that there was any ill intention from him though. There was also a Drifblim following him closely, and Ash could easily feel the connection between them. That was one of the things he was pretty good at.

As this person started rustling the bushes near them, Alberto turned around and threw a pokeball in the air. "It's Darkrai! Lickilicky, use Hyper Beam!"

"Wait!" Ash cried out, a second too late as the pokemon launched the overly powerful attack at the man that he knew was in the bushes. Ash winced, feeling the pain coming from the person when he reached out, but he was still alive, so that was a good thing.

A tall, skinny man with round glasses, and lavender hair stumbled up from the bushes and muttered, "Why would you do that?" He stumbled into a tree, trying to hold onto his equipment. The Drifblim that Ash sensed earlier descended beside the man, staring at him with worry.

"Tonio!" Alice cried in horror and rushed over to him. She helped him straighten himself up, holding onto him to make sure that he could walk straight. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said with a contrasting shake of his head. "Not the first time something's blown up around me."

Alice let out a small sigh and rolled her blue eyes before looking back at them with a slight smile. "This is my friend, Tonio. He's a scientist."

"Scientist?"

"Yeah, that's when really smart people –."

"I know what a scientist is, Misty," Ash deadpanned, flicking her bangs. She made a face back at him, but a couple sparks from Pikachu's cheeks kept them from starting a yelling war with one another. Pikachu let out a happy sound from Ash's shoulder, nuzzling his cheek against his head for getting the message.

"I think the easiest way to describe what Tonio does is that he studies physics," Alice told them.

"Physics?" May repeated in the same tone as Ash had used for his earlier inquiry about Tonio being a scientist. "That's with speed and things like that, right?"

"Yeah, when you get to your high school learning modules, you have to take a bit of it," Brock explained. "Well, in Kanto, you do. I'm not sure about Hoenn or Sinnoh."

Ash shuddered at the thought of it. Every traveling trainer was still required to do the school work that those who chose to stay in actual school did. That was one of the negatives many cited for becoming a traveling trainer when they were only ten, because they had no teachers around if they needed immediate help, needing to wait until someone in the league could get back to their emails and messages, and they had to learn how to divide their time up. They could learn at almost any pace they wanted, but there were still semester deadlines that many ended up forgetting about. With Brock there, neither he nor Misty ever forgot about that, and he passed that habit onto May, Max and Dawn.

Max had been a special exception. He actually ended up skipping a few years, so he could take some time off of school work when he was traveling with them, often helping May with her own work.

The course work could be uploaded to pokedexes, pokenavs, phones, laptops or anything like that,

but the vast majority of trainers used the computer labs that were set up in every Pokemon Center for them. While Ash himself was a slow studier, so he tended to do it slowly over a long period of time on his pokedex, Brock and Misty always just took some time at every Pokemon Center they came across (emergencies aside) to catch up. It was mandatory, because no one wanted a large amount of children to be illiterate, or not knowing basic mathematics, amongst other things.

“Physics is putting it broadly,” Tonio spoke up, breaking Ash from his musings. “I was investigating the space-time abnormality that I had detected.” He shoved his laptop into Alice's hands, and knelt down in front of the melted pillars, studying them carefully and curiously. He must have been used to getting blasted by attacks, because he didn't seem worse for wear at all, almost like how Ash could shrug off Pikachu's thunderbolts. “It can't be,” he muttered to himself.

Without warning, a chunk of the stone fell off, slamming into his head and making them all wince as the bloody gash that formed. Alice gasped with surprise and knelt down next to him. “Tonio!”

“I'm fine, really,” he winced as he touched his head and looked at the blood on his hand.

“Alice,” Alberto spoke up, “you don't have to be so nice to him.”

“Excuse me?” she asked, standing up and facing him with a raised eyebrow.

“After all, my dear,” Alberto completely ignored her, putting his arm around her and dragging her closer, “you are to be my wife, remember?”

Brock made a sound that could only be described as another overly-dramatic heartbreaking moment. Dawn gasped in surprise and said, “No way!”

“But he's a jerk,” May whispered so that only they could hear. “And I know my fair share of jerks.”

Alice scowled at him, elbowing Alberto roughly in the stomach. He backed off, arm in front of his stomach but not willing to show any another sign of pain. “I already told you no!” She turned away from him. “Come on, I'm too young to think about marriage.”

“I've decided I like her,” Misty said gleefully. There was something sweet about seeing such a nice young lady completely tell off an obvious jerk, in her mind. She heard Brock sigh in relief behind her, and looked back at him to raise an eyebrow. “You DO know that you don't have a shot, right?”

“You don't know that.”

“Of course, of course,” Alberto said with an exaggerated wink that showed he clearly didn't get the message. “Now that that is settled, why don't you come over to my place for a little dinner, and after we can – ”

“She said no!” None of them had even seen Dawn move, but somehow, the ten-year-old managed to get around to where the two young adults were, pushing Alberto off of Alice. She scowled at him and said, “Alice is so not interested!”

“Chi chi chimchar!” Alice's pokemon apparently agreed with dawn, scowling up at him.

“I like Dawn too,” Misty noted with a nod of her head.

Ash just groaned and muttered something that sounded like 'insane girls' under his breath as he hurried over to where Dawn was.

“Young lady,” Alberto loomed over Dawn with a dark look. “If you know what's good for you,

you'll butt out!"

"What's your problem?" Ash snapped at him, putting himself between Dawn and the man. "She's ten and you're like, what? 25? 30? Leave her alone!"

"I'll have you know that I'm only 22, and you should keep a leash on your little girlfriend."

Ash made a face at him that actually made Misty, May and Brock snort with amusement. It was a rare sight to see on him, a look that a teacher would normally reserve for a student that they were fed up with (Ash himself was very familiar with being on the receiving end of this look). "Did you not hear me just say she was ten? My girlfriend is over there." He pointed at Misty. "And I'm nice compared to her, especially when jerks are picking on people that she likes." Misty could take this Alberto guy any day of the week in Ash's mind. What would he do, sick a pokemon on her? He knew any one wouldn't stand a chance against her Gyarados, or even her Psyduck.

Brock made his way over to Tonio, and was checking his head. "That had to hurt. You'll probably need to get someone to actually check it." He took a water bottle and a rag out of his pack, splashing some of the water on it and handing it to the young man. "Keep pressure on it for now. It's not bad, but head injuries always seem worse than they are because they bleed a lot more."

"Thanks," Tonio nodded his head, but winced as he stood up.

"So," May asked sauntered up to his side, staring up at Tonio with innocent, sapphire eyes, "Who's the jerk?" She pointed at the salmon-haired man.

"That's Baron Alberto."

"Of course Ash would pick a fight with a Baron," Misty sighed with exasperation, shaking her head.

"Dawn did too," May pointed out, sounding more amused than anything else.

"Yeah, and I'm already starting to think that she and Ash are long-lost siblings," the redhead deadpanned.

Ash could already tell that Baron Alberto was done dealing with him and Dawn. This guy wasn't bad, but he wasn't a ray of sunshine by any means. Ash knew that he could be egotistical at times, his friends were never shy to point it out, but this man took it to a whole new level.

"Alice, how about we leave these silly children?" He reached out for her, but the blond woman was quick to dart away from him, even though she had Tonio's clunky laptop in her hands. She ran over to the injured man and suddenly held onto his arm. "You see, Tonio's the one I like."

Misty completely ignored the sounds of Brock's 'heartbreak' once again, raising an eyebrow at the scene. She looked over at Ash and Dawn as they joined them again. She leaned onto Ash's arm and asked, "Aren't they cute together?" She made sure that Brock could hear them.

"Uh..." Ash stared at her, brown eyes clearly unsure of what was an acceptable answer in this situation. "...is this a trick question?" May and Dawn both snorted with amusement, and he had to wonder if this was some secret girl question that he didn't understand. Why would he find Alice liking Tonio cute? Good on them, but it was really none of his business.

Alberto suddenly burst into laughter and said, "You have a sense of humour, Alice. I do like that."

"A joke?" Tonio suddenly laughed too. "Jeez, let me in on the joke next time." Alice stared at him

with unreadable eyes before pulling away from him and staring pointedly in the opposite direction. Tonio let out a sigh, looking downhearted for a moment before he managed to hide that.

“Boys are ridiculous,” May commented.

“I thought they got better when they got older,” Dawn asked.

“They do, but they always stay hopeless in one way or another.”

“I’m right here,” Ash said dryly. He just knew that she was referring to him. Misty just grinned at him.

“We need to get your head looked at,” Alice said, her voice a little stiff. “Come on, we’re going to the clinic to get that patched up.” She shoved his laptop into his hands. “Will you guys be alright on your own?”

“Actually, it’s getting close to lunch,” Brock said. “We should get to the Pokemon Center and get things sorted out.” They all knew that tone of voice, the one Brock used when he claimed his heart was broken and he threw himself into work and organization, which almost always included ogling a Nurse Joy or Officer Jenny.

“Alright, just keep going down this path and you’ll get there.” Alice motioned to the one in front of them before dragging Tonio off in another direction, mumbling under her breath.

“Well, people here are certainly interesting,” May spoke up with a peppy voice.

“That’s one way to put it,” Dawn agreed as the group started walking away.

Pikachu’s ears suddenly twitched as he looked around on Ash’s shoulder. Ash himself tensed up a bit when he would have sworn that he felt something. He spun around to look at the bushes, but there was nothing there.

“Ash?” Misty called out to him.

“Coming!” He yelled back, hesitating for a moment. He couldn’t feel anything there though, so he turned and ran after his friends, deciding not to really think too much on it. Everything felt so weird and strange by the destroyed pillars, so it was probably just getting to him.

A small part in the back of his mind told him to stay on edge more, because he was wrong.

that one off. Everything felt weird and strange in that specific spot, so it was probably just that getting to him.

Though every other time he thought that in the past, he had been wrong.

Sky

Beyond The Shadows

Two rooms in the Pokemon Center had been booked for them. The one in Alamos Town was massive, mostly because it acted as a hotel for pokemon trainers, the size of it to accommodate all of the Coordinators that were traveling there for the contest. They were lucky that they had Dawn and May to sign for one each, because otherwise they would have only been able to get a single one to cramp all five of them in. Ash and Brock's room (on paper, it belonged to Dawn) had two single beds for them, and the one that the girls would be staying in had a bunkbed and a single bed. It was nice to have a bit of privacy, but none of them would have complained to be shoved into the same room as long as they all got beds, or even a little foldout cot.

Ash was laying back on his bed, enjoying the smell of the fresh sheets as Pikachu and Ria snuggled close to him. He only got his small pokemon's forgiveness for putting her in her pokeball when he offered her some of Brock's gourmet pokemon food that he swiped when his friend was in the bathroom.

"I don't mind the pokeball too much," Ria admitted to him, sensing what he was thinking.

"Yeah?"

"I thought it would be bad because Pika described it like that."

"Pikachu's dramatic."

"Pi." Pikachu shocked him lightly.

"Hey," Ash shook his hand and gave the pokemon a joking glare. "Pokeballs are good, you know. I can keep you safe in there much easier. And you can get away from Piplup."

"Piplup's annoying. I want him to stop trying to Peck me all of the time," Ria grumbled. Piplup learned that the Riolu was weak against flying-type attacks, and had a tendency to sneak up on her and try to use it. It wasn't that Piplup was trying to hurt her, but he tended to be a little jealous from time to time, and was always trying to make himself stronger.

"I'll tell Dawn."

"I was glad I was in the pokeball earlier," she told him, "whatever that dark thing was, I didn't like it."

Ash looked down at her with surprise, and Pikachu perked up a bit too. "You felt it?"

"Pi pikachu pi cha pika," Pikachu spoke to Riolu.

"Yeah I did feel what Pika heard and you felt. It was really sad and I wanted to cry."

"Sad," Ash repeated slowly. Yes, that was the emotion he had felt rush through him earlier. There was something negative there, but sadness, that was a little more specific. Sadness with a bit of underlying anger was a good way to describe it. How could some so sad be evil or bad like Baron Alberto claimed. It sounded like a typical misunderstood pokemon story to him, and he had heard many iterations of that before. It was used as a reason for violence and abandonment, and Ash absolutely despised it.

He also despised the fact that, if he wouldn't have been able to feel all of this uncertainty involving

Darkrai, if that was indeed what he felt earlier, he probably would have believed Alberto mindlessly. He was honestly a bit ashamed of that.

A knock on the door broke him out of his thoughts. A smile appeared on his face as the familiar, comforting aura that radiated from the other side of the door, and he called out, "Door's open, Mist!"

The redhead opened the door and looked down at him with amusement as she walked into the room, closing the door behind her again. "Being lazy, I see."

"Everyone deserves to be lazy once and a while," he commented blinking up at her innocently. "Not going to ask how I knew it was you?"

"I know how you knew."

"It was your clunky feet."

She scowled at him as she pushed his legs aside and sat at the end of the bed, smiling as Pikachu scurried away from Ash, curling up on her lap instead. Ria watched curiously before inching closer, almost shyly. Misty giggled a bit and held an arm out, and the fighting-type happily snuggled up to her, beside Pikachu.

"Traitors," Ash mumbled.

Misty smiled at him smugly and flicked his foot lightly, laughing at the squawking sound he made as he jerked his feet away from her. Ash tried to hide the fact that he was very ticklish on his feet from everyone, but she found that out when they were only ten and never let him live it down. "Anyway, you have no right to judge noise. Your version of subtle usually includes breaking things and loud noises."

Ash chuckled at her as he pushed himself up. "Getting tired of May and Dawn already?"

"I'm used to May, or I say I am, I mean, I love her to death, and I really like Dawn so far, but they're a bit..." Misty waved a hand in the air, as if that explained everything. Luckily for her, Ash knew both of the girls much better than she did, so he understood instantly.

"Exhausting?"

"Yes!" She pointed at him. "They're exhausting to deal with when they're together. Kinda like my sisters, but still in a very different way. I swear, either you just happened to find two girls who have a lot of similarities with you, or your habits are rubbing off on them."

Ash blinked at her, clearly perplexed. "May and Dawn are nothing like me."

"They are, trust me on that. It might not be looks or constant mannerisms, but it's there." She smiled at him warmly as she ran her fingers through Pikachu's yellow fur and Riolu's blue fuzz. "You ready to get up and explore more? Or are you still trying to sleep off that meal?"

"Well..." He could lay down and fall asleep, being lazy was actually a rarity that he usually only experienced for a day or two when he returned home, but Ash knew that he only had Misty and May, around for a few days at most. "I guess we can go and do something. Since you're here and all."

"How thoughtful," she laughed and shook her head. "Here I thought you actually missed me."

He made a face and looked down at his hands guiltily. "I do miss you. All the time. Sorry, I guess I'm just not...good at this whole boyfriend thing."

Misty regarded him for a moment before shaking her head again, a little more seriously this time. "That's not true. You call me whenever you get the chance, and we send emails to each other all the time. Honestly, if you weren't...well...you, I'd be a bit weirded out right now. Being all sweet and sappy would be annoying and boring, and I kinda like you, so I wouldn't want you to change. Would you want me to act differently?"

"No," he answered immediately. It wasn't just a reflex answer either, because Ash liked Misty as a whole. Sure, she annoyed him at times and got him downright mad at others, but his mother always told him that it was important to take the bad with the good, and she had never led him astray before, so that was exactly what he'd do. He thought about that for a moment before he understood what she was getting at. "Oh." He was just basing his earlier statement on the gushing she had done about romantic things when they were younger. He had changed since then though, so it made sense that she would outgrow some of that too.

"Oh," Misty laughed nudged him playfully. "So, we never really got to explore the gardens much earlier, and I know that Dawn and May would like to go back. Think Brock's up for it?"

"He has no choice, he's not leaving me with the three of you."

She thought about that for a moment before her eyes lit up. "The girls outnumber the boys for once!"

"Yeah, yeah," he stood up, stretching out before he slipped on his vest again, zipping it up and then putting his hat on. "Come on, or are you going to stay there and be lazy?"

"You think you're getting witty, don't you?"

"I know I am." He held out his hand. First, Pikachu used that as a bridge to get on his shoulder, and then Misty took it and let him pull her up. Ria climbed up onto Misty's shoulder instead of jumping up onto, sitting happily.

"Did you ask if you could be there, missy?"

"I like Misty," Ria said, "She's nice and you both feel warm and really happy when you're both here."

"Aww," Misty cooed at her. "That's sweet Ri—did you just use telepathy?" She looked at Ash with wide, sea green eyes. "Since when can she do that?"

"We've been keeping it on the down-low," Ash shrugged. "Dawn...she doesn't know about any of...my weirdness, and I'm going to try and keep it that way. The less people know, the less danger they'll be in."

Misty pressed her lips together before she sighed and nodded her head. With anything else, she might have put up an argument, but aura was something that they all knew so little about, that he might have been right about keeping it to only those who knew. For now, at least.

Not wanting to bring anyone down, Ash smiled brightly as he held her hand, pulling her out of the room, and making sure that the door was locked behind them. They were leaving almost all of their things (except for some money and their pokemon, of course) in the rooms so they wouldn't have to lug around a lot of stuff.

Misty kicked on her door on the way by. "We're downstairs!"

"Be there in a minute!" May called back, as Dawn laughed loudly.

"Should we be scared?" she asked Ash as they continued down the hall to the elevator.

"Probably," he replied with a nod.

They found Brock downstairs on one of the computers, looking over something with a thoughtful expression. Ash took a seat in one of the chairs beside him and asked, "What's up, Brocko?" Pikachu jumped from his shoulder and sat on the table, while Ria followed suit, jumping from Misty's shoulder, onto Ash's head, and sitting down beside her 'brother' pokemon.

"Oh, nothing much," he said, sounding a bit distracted as he minimized the screen. "Just doing some thinking."

"Uh oh." Misty wheeled another chair up to them, unable, or at least not trying, to stop from rolling into Ash, knocking him into the computer table beside them. She completely ignored his overly dramatic whine of protest as she leaned forward and stared at Brock intently. "That usually means trouble."

They all paused for a moment, just waiting for the 'and make it double', sighing with relief as it never came. "Don't laugh, but I've been thinking lately, all these babes – I mean a lot of the ladies I've met recently, they all seem to have a thing for people with degrees and everything. You know, smart guys."

"But you're a smart guy," Ash raised an eyebrow. "So I don't see the problem."

"Like you're one to judge about having a hard time with girls." He nodded at Misty and how they were sitting close to each other, but then froze, his face shifted into one of pure horror. "Oh god, Ash got a girlfriend before I did. You two got together before I found someone."

"Hey!" Ash cried out.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Misty snapped at the same time.

"You two are clueless and stubborn! Then there's me! I've got intelligence! I'm kind! I'm funny! I can cook! I love cleaning! I'm good with kids! I'm suave! I'm every girl's dream!"

"Suave?" Ash muttered, obviously confused.

Misty shook her head at both of them. "What does this have to do with the type of guys who have degrees or whatever?"

Brock calmed down a little, getting back to what he was thinking about. "Well, I've been thinking that, since I'm done with school, I might see about taking up something else. There are a lot of courses I could take on breeding and things like that. So, it doesn't really have to do with girls, it has to do with me and what I want. You know, looking at the future and all."

Ash and Misty were both silent for a moment, before Ash said, "Or you could actually go to a university." He looked up at Misty. "There's internships and stuff too, right? Please tell me I'm not just making that up."

"No you didn't," Misty shook her head, smiling proudly. "Ash is right, Brock."

“I'd have to go somewhere and stay there in order for that to happen.” His voice was so hesitant, but at the same time, there was an edge of wistfulness to it. Something that didn't go unnoticed by his two friends.

“If that's what you want, then it's what you should do.” Ash's words were confident, because if that's what Brock wanted to do, he didn't want his friend to hold himself back because of him, that wouldn't be fair to him at all. It wasn't his own arrogance talking, Ash had known Brock for over four years now, and he just knew that Brock's biggest hesitation would have been leaving him to travel alone. After all, even if it seemed like Brock was going to go away and stay home, he always came back. This would be completely different though.

To Ash, his friends' dreams were just as important as his own. He wanted them all to succeed. He wanted them all to be happy. He absolutely loathed saying 'goodbye' to friends, both people and pokemon, but Ash was learning that someone leaving didn't mean that he wouldn't see them again. It was just a 'see ya later' for a while, and that was something he could deal with if it was what they wanted.

Brock smiled at him in the same way Misty did, almost proudly, though he didn't say why. “I'll think about it. There's still loads of time.” He stretched out, spinning around on the chair. “Now where are those girls, or did you guys kill them already?”

“Killed them,” Misty said instantly.

“And buried them,” Ash added.

He snorted with amusement and looked over their shoulders. “Well there are a couple of zombies coming towards us then.”

“Get the fire!”

“I only have water pokemon!”

“I thought Gyarados could use Flamethrower.” They both spun around at the same time to try and see the two girls walk into the room, whispering to each other excitedly, but ended up smashing their knees together roughly.

“Ow! You have bony knees! You need to eat more!”

“What, do you expect them to be flabby?”

Ash opened his mouth to say something but then closed it. He had nothing to say to that. Misty just smiled smugly.

Brock shook his head and chuckled. “One minute I think you've both grown up. The next I realize I was completely misguided.” He stood up and waved to Dawn and May, who made their way towards them as Misty, and then Ash, got up. Brock watched Pikachu and Ria climb up onto Ash before turning his attention back to the girls. “Ready to go?”

“You bet!” Dawn pumped her fist excitedly. “I want to see the rest of the garden and then I want to go shopping for some cute contest costumes! Apparently they have amazing little boutiques here!”

“Yeah, it was in my travel guide!” May added with just as much enthusiasm.

“I can hardly contain my excitement. Oof.” Ash looked at Misty as she nudged him. “Wha? You don't want to do that type of thing either!”

“No, but we can always leave them with Brock and go exploring ourselves.”

“Never thought of that.”

Misty patted his cheek lightly before saying, “I think we've established that I'm the brains between us.” He stuck his tongue out at her and she laughed as they followed the others out of the Pokemon Center.

...

“You know, I'm really curious about Darkrai,” Dawn spoke up as they walked through the trees, admiring the part of the garden that they didn't get to explore earlier.

“Why's that?”

“Well...” she trailed off, unsure of how to explain it. “I dunno. Most pokemon just seem so...good. I've never heard of one giving nightmares before.”

“Wait until you fill your pokedex up more,” Ash advised her, “you'll find lots of little tidbits in there you wish you hadn't found.” He shuddered at the thought of some of the pokedex entries he read. The more frightening ones were usually cautionary tales from the past, when pokemon and humans were more at odds than anything else, but they still weren't exactly pleasant to think about.

“I don't think any pokemon is inherently evil,” Brock said. “Not an entire species of one, that is. Maybe individuals, yes, but as a whole, I doubt it. It's the exact same with humans. We probably don't have much to worry about here, if Darkrai is even real.”

That was true, but in some cases, there was only one of a certain type of pokemon. Ash knew that there were multiple Mew, multiple Lugia, Articuno and all the other legendary birds excluding Ho-oh (as far as he knew), but in some cases, there was only one. Mewtwo was like that, and Ash was pretty sure there was only one Celebi. It could hop through time, so it could easily be seen at more than one place at a time. If there was only one Darkrai, and it just happened to be bad, did that mean that any Darkrai would be bad? If there could be another one. He never really thought of that before, for good reason, it was starting to give him a headache.

He thought back to the negative energy he felt earlier. Was that Darkrai? He never felt anything quite like it before. If it was though, he now completely agreed with Ria about how the presence felt sad, a bit angry, but not evil.

Ash broke out of his thoughts as he felt a wave of energy rush towards them. It hit a second later, the same ripples that they felt when they were with Alice in her hot air balloon.

Ria let out a tiny squeak as she held her head. Realizing that if the pressure from this energy was as bad as it was with him, it must have been horrible for his baby pokemon. Ash didn't want to keep her in a pokeball, but in this situation it was worth it. He fished the correct ball from his belt, gently tapping her with the buttons. He could feel her relief as she went inside, and Ash knew he had done the right thing. Now if only he could protect Pikachu the same way. His partner wouldn't agree to that at all, and would take clinging to his shoulder painfully, fur standing on end and sparks of electricity shining from his cheeks.

“Not again!” May called out. “We felt this in town earlier!”

“We did too!” Dawn yelled back. “What do you think it is?”

"This is probably what Tonio was talking about!" Brock told them.

Ash wasn't listening to that anymore. He looked around down a shadowy path, shuddering a bit as Pikachu let out a very unhappy sound. He could feel it again, that sadness, mixed with anger and pain. He could almost see something, or at least an outline to something that his eyes couldn't actually see. Glowing and pulsing a violent purple like he had never seen before, Ash watched as the energy and the aura surrounding it lashed out, slicing a solid rock in half.

Despite the ripples of energy, Ash pushed himself to his feet moving closer to the path, eyes following the aura as a shadow manifested on the ground.

"Ash?" Misty called out to him as the waves stopped.

He didn't look around at her, brown eyes staying locked on his target. "There's something here."

Almost like his words summoned it, clouds covered over the sun, darkening the garden around them. The path, already shaded from the sun, became almost impossibly dark for the daytime, the shadow on the ground just barely visible.

"Chaa." Pikachu shuddered on his shoulder.

"Go to Misty."

"Pi Pikapi." He shook his head, but Pikachu couldn't hide how much he wanted to go and cuddle with the red haired girl.

"Go to Misty." Ash spoke more firmly, and the frightened pokemon finally listening, hopping off of his shoulder and running over, bounding into the redhead's arms.

"Do not come here." The voice was deep and grumbling, white flowing hair and a glowing blue eye rising up out of the ground as the shadow manifested in front of them.

"Darkrai," Ash muttered under his breath. He didn't look around, his arm shooting out to stop Dawn from running any closer to it. He knew that she was just curious, but this was not something he was going to let her run at.

"Is that Darkrai?" Her voice was excited and terrified at the sight of the legendary pokemon. He could understand why though, since they were so rarely seen, even by the people who lived close to where they were rumoured to dwell.

"Yeah. I think it is." That was exactly why Ash wasn't going to let Dawn run towards it. He still couldn't make heads or tails of it, and that was by using his aura.

"Did you do that?" May called out to it, her voice coming out a little more squeaky than she meant to. Ash didn't have to look at her to know that she was probably trying to put on a brave face, but had most likely retreated closer to Brock or Misty. "The weird...energy we just felt?"

Darkrai stared at them all in turn, his glowing blue eye digging into their very souls until it rested on Ash. He felt a shiver go up his spine. It was reaching out to him somehow, he could feel it, but it was hard to describe exactly. He wanted something, but the raven-haired teenager didn't have the slightest clue about what it could be.

"You."

"Me?" Ash repeated with confusion, pointing at himself.

Darkrai nodded his head and then projected a thought into his head, one that he didn't really grasp when something interrupted them.

“Darkrai! I knew I'd find you!” Alberto rushed from down a path, throwing his pokeball into the air. No one had time to react, to say or do anything about his sudden appearance. “Lickilicky, Hyper Beam!”

Darkrai literally faded away, turning into a shadow on the dirt and sliding around with ease as the attack slammed into the ground, sending dust up into the air. Everyone scrambled out of the way as it rushed by them before appearing again. Its blue eye looked at Lickilicky for a moment, before it looked at Ash again. Without any hesitation, an ominous, black orb with a violent violet glow appeared in Darkrai's ghastly hands, and he threw it at Lickilicky.

The pokemon was surprisingly able to dodge out of the way in time, but the attack kept going.

Ash knew it was coming, he could feel it, but something was stopping him from even attempting to protect himself. The orb slammed into his chest and pain exploded.

The last sound he heard was a combined scream of his name mingling with a terrified 'Pikapi'.

...

Four voices screamed Ash's name as he was surrounded by a black sphere after the smaller one hit his chest. His whole body seized up, turning a sickly grey colour like someone sucked the life out of him. Then the sphere vanished, and he fell.

Darkrai stared at what he had done before sinking back into the ground and vanishing, but only Alberto was paying any attention to that.

Dawn was standing the closest to him, enough to feel a wave of the negative energy that left her with goosebumps. She screamed and tried to catch him as he fell after the sphere disappeared, but his dead weight was too much for her skinny arms. She ended up stumbling to her knees, holding onto his upper body. Her hands were shaking, and her dark blue eyes stared at him with horror, because the 10-year-old didn't know what to do.

Pikachu was the fastest, moving to Ash's side and nudging him, but he didn't move. The electric-type sniffed his trainer, letting out a sob of 'pikapi' before charging up his cheeks.

“Don't!” Brock yelled. “It might make it worse!” Pikachu's ears fell and he cringed to the ground.

Misty didn't care that she skinned her knees when she skidded to the ground beside him and Dawn. She reached out, grimacing at how clammy his skin suddenly felt, but he reacted to her touch slightly, his arm twitching a little. He was still breathing, and that made her calm down a little bit.

“We need to get help,” Brock told them all in a firm, authoritative voice as he knelt down, pressing his fingers to Ash's pulse. “Nurse Joy.”

“Shouldn't he go to a hospital?” May asked, her worry and panic obvious.

“No. This was a pokemon attack. Nurse Joy will be the better option. You!” Brock glared at Baron Alberto, who was just watching the scene with a bit of fascination. “Where's the closest Pokemon Center?”

“Ten minutes that way.” He pointed. “Now excuse me, I need to go find Darkrai. An attack on a human is unacceptable!” He turned on his gold-heeled boot and walked away. Lickilicky looked at

them with regret, but had no choice but to go with his trainer as he was called back into his pokeball.

“Useless son of a -.”

“Misty!”

“Well he is! Who just leaves an injured person behind!” She would have seethed more, but at Brock's stern expression, the redhead settled on glowering angrily. “What do we do?”

“Help me get Ash onto my back. He's not physically hurt so it should be okay to move him. I want you to stay behind me to make sure he doesn't slip, kid's not as light as he used to be. May, Dawn, I want you two to go ahead and tell Nurse Joy what happened and that we're coming. Stay together at all times, understand?”

The two younger girls hesitated by May let out a shuddering breath and nodded her head. She tugged at Dawn's arm to pull her up and said, “Come on.”

Dawn hesitated, still holding onto Ash, before she carefully let Misty take him instead, allowing May to pull her to her feet. She wiped at her eyes, trying to stop the tears that threatened to fall. She was still shaking, visibly horrified by what happened.

May held onto her arm and tugged. Dawn silently hesitated again, only moving when May muttered her name. The two of them ran head, desperately trying to get to the Pokemon Center quickly.

Brock knelt down on the ground, and with Misty's help, struggled to get Ash onto his back. Finally, Brock had a good grip on him, and Misty stayed a step behind him just in case Ash started slipping. Neither one of them said a word, not even Pikachu, as he climbed up onto Misty's shoulder.

Nurse Joy was already at the door and waiting for them when they got to the Pokemon Center. It took less than ten minutes, but for all of them it seemed like a never ending trip. The nurse's kind, pale blue eyes widened in horror as she said, “How long as it been?”

“Ten, fifteen minutes since he was hit.”

“Alright, hurry, we need to get him on a bed before it starts. If it sticks to the same pattern as the pokemon.”

“It starts?” Misty asked as she followed them to the room Nurse Joy instructed. It was isolated, which was very strange, with a bed and medical equipment.

Brock set Ash down on the bed, and Nurse Joy was quick and taking his vest off of him, his white shirt following a moment later. She grabbed the stethoscope that Chansey brought over, grimacing a bit as she listened to Ash's heartbeat.

“His chest,” Dawn said softly, staring at the dark bruise that was there.

“Be thankful that's all,” May mumbled to her, knowing from experience that Ash Ketchum and trouble usually came hand in hand, but Dawn obviously hadn't been around him long enough to experience the worst things. Those moments where Ash stupidly forgot about himself in his attempts to help someone else, usually ending up in a more serious injury that he tried to play off. A stubbed toe or a paper cut was one thing, Ash would whine for days about that, but he tended to fall silent, trying not to draw attention to himself if he was hurt. It was infuriating to anyone who

cared about him.

“Physically, for now it's all,” the pink-haired woman sighed in regard's to Ash's bruise. “He'll probably feel some tenderness on his ribs, so I'll wrap it up. He could end up hurting himself though, it depends on how bad it gets though.”

“How bad what gets?” Misty stressed, wanting to know what was happening.

She got her answer as Ash suddenly groaned and twitched. His face screwed up and he suddenly thrashed.

“The nightmares.” Nurse Joy watched as Ash jerked a bit. “If he gets too violent, we'll have to restrain him, or give him muscle relaxants. That's if he reacts the same way pokemon do.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Brock wasn't even fawning over her, his focus solely on his younger friend. He vaguely realized that Nurse Joy wasn't questioning Darkrai's existence at all. She must have treated a number of his victims before to be so familiar with what was going to happen.

“No. Make him comfortable and wait to see what happens.”

None of them liked the sound of that, but there was literally nothing they could do for him.

“Can we bring in some chairs?” Misty asked, her voice quiet, subdued, and not at all like her.

“If you want to stay with him, yes,” Nurse Joy nodded with a frown. “However, I will need to keep the door close, in case it gets too loud.” She didn't have to say it, but they all knew what she really meant. In case he started screaming too loudly.

“I'll get some chairs,” Brock spoke up after a moment of silence, getting up and following Nurse Joy out of the room.

“I need to – I'll be right back.” Dawn suddenly turned around and sprinted down the hall, back into the lobby and towards the elevator that would take her up to their rooms.

May and Misty exchanged worried looks before the younger of the two said, “We should go see what's wrong, shouldn't we?”

Misty looked over at Ash's twitching form with worry, but seeing that Pikachu was already curled up beside him, his eyes closed but his ears perked up to show that he was actually very alert and obviously had no intention of moving. Poor Pikachu probably thought that this was his fault when there was nothing that he could have done. Misty knew that he wouldn't let anything happen to Ash, not now, so she nodded her head at May's question.

The two of them made their way up the stairs, getting there only just after Dawn, who left their door wide open.

The blue-haired girl was sitting on her bed, the single one, trying to brush her hair, but her hands were shaking so badly that she couldn't. A quick glance at May told her that she noticed it too. May's sapphire eyes met her, and Misty felt a little hopeless for a moment. Misty made her way over to the girl, sitting beside her and setting a hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Dawn flinched, Piplup letting out a sad sound from where he sat on the pillow on the bed, looking entirely lost and not sure how to help his trainer. Dawn looked up at the Misty for a moment, before her eyes watered and she suddenly let out a sob, almost throwing herself onto the redhead. “I'm sorry!”

“Sorry?” Misty didn't hesitate to give her a hug and pat her back comfortingly. “For what?”

“I was standing right beside him! I could have pulled him out of the way!” Dawn looked at the ground in shame as she cried. “You must hate me.”

“I'm worried about him,” Misty said with a shake of her head, “but I don't hate you. There was nothing you could have done. It all happened so fast.” She looked up at May and nodded for her to come closer.

“If you had the time to pull him, he would have had the time to move,” the brunette added, picking up Piplup from the pillow, and then sitting down beside Dawn while holding the water-type. “Ash is pretty quick, and while he's as dense as a boulder, his instincts are pretty spot on when it comes to pokemon. If there was a way to move in time, he would have done it.”

“I'm sorry for crying,” Dawn said as she wiped her tears away. “Neither of you are. I mean, why am I? Shouldn't you be the most upset, Misty? And May, you knew him longer.” She looked down again. “Why am I so pathetic.”

Misty shook her head again and smiled at her. “You're not pathetic. Of course I'm upset, scared and angry at what happened, but if I cried every time that something bad happened to Ash, I'd fill my own pool. And I have very big pools at home. I do feel like crying a bit, and there's nothing wrong with that, but just because I'm his girlfriend doesn't mean you can't be just as upset. The same with May and Brock. A friend was hurt right in front of us.”

“I know he'll be okay,” May smiled encouragingly. “He's Ash, he's always okay. So there's no need to cry.”

Dawn looked from one to the other. “You're both so smart. I wish I was like that.”

“It's not intelligence, it's experience,” Misty told her. “When you leave home at ten, you grow up so much faster than those who don't or those who leave later. I mean, even Ash is a lot better than he was when I first met him – the day he started training. Trust me, I'm sure you were much better off than he was. Don't worry about it. All this 'wisdom' we have will come to you.” An annoyed expression appeared on her face. “Especially when dealing with Ash's idiocy.”

That made Dawn giggle a little bit. She smiled up at them and took Piplup from May's arms. “Thanks.”

“Pip piplup!” The pokemon hugged her, and she snuggled him closer.

“What are friends for?” May asked her happily and Misty nodded. “If one of us ever breaks down, we'll be counting on you to tell us to calm down too!”

Dawn stared at both of them quietly before grinning happily. She wiped the last of her tears and stood up. “I guess we should go see if Brock needs help moving chairs or something?”

“Yeah, that's probably a good idea,” Misty agreed, and the three girls (plus Piplup) left to head back down the elevator.

...

Ash slammed into the ground, his body curling in pain as he let out a gasp. He was tense for a moment, trying to remember why he would have hit the ground so hard. Brief little flashes of memories rushed through him, and he remembered Darkrai throwing something at him. It wasn't a Shadow Ball, Ash knew what those felt like, so he had no idea what it was.

That was when he notice how quiet it was. He kept his eyes closed, trying to concentrate. He couldn't hear a thing. Not the sound of footsteps, not his friends breathing, not the sound of water coming from the fountain that he knew was nearby, not even the rustle of leaves in the wind. If he couldn't hear his own sharp, shallow breaths, Ash would have assumed he had gone deaf.

Then a bit of panic rushed through him because he realized he couldn't see anything. Once his aura was unlocked, constantly seeing the outlines of things behind his eyelids was annoying and he eventually began to tune it out a bit. It was always there, but it was easy to notice. Now, he couldn't see a thing and it was incredibly unnerving.

His brown eyes snapped open, and the pain completely faded away. He looked around, noticing that he was in the same place he had fallen, but it felt wrong. Nothing felt alive.

Ash pushed himself to his feet, looking around with confusion. There was no one there, no pokemon, no people, and not even the trees were giving off their pale aura. He was so used to it that he didn't even notice that faint glow to them anymore, but now that it was gone, he felt uncomfortable, exposed. Completely alone.

“Pikachu?” That was the first name out of his mouth, because if his friends had run off to get help, Pikachu would have surely stayed behind. A bit of panic hit him as he realized that Darkrai might have done something to them. His friends could be in danger, and he was just standing around. “Misty! Brock! Dawn! May!”

His voice didn't even echo, despite the fact that there was no one around him.

Ash looked around with confusion, and that was when he eyes fell onto the pillars. They were all completely straight, and he knew for a fact that they had been twisted and bent only moments ago.

He walked forward, looking around with pure confusion because he had no idea where he was. He reached down to his belt, and he could feel his pokeballs, but he couldn't feel the ever present, distinct auras of his pokemon. Something else that he realized he took for granted. This wasn't right, it was like none of it was real.

Then he felt something. It was the only thing that he could actually feel and see in that sense, so he noticed it instantly. Ash whipped around, stumbling back when he saw his own shadow twist, stretch and distort on the ground. It spread everywhere, consuming the benches, the trees, the leaves, and even the sky. The dark, but definitely not evil, aura he felt seemed to concentrate behind him, and he spun around again.

The looming silhouette of Darkrai hovered in front of him, only a glowing blue eye was visible, before it lunged at him, completely consuming Ash in the darkness.

He was startled, but oddly enough, he wasn't afraid.

The cry of a pokemon, high pitched but echoing and powerful hit his ears, and Ash could just barely make out a massive figure in the darkness, its glowing pink eyes focusing on him briefly. He was startled, because this pokemon felt just as real as Darkrai himself. Ash reached out to it, both physically and mentally, almost recoiling when he felt how angry, hurt, and upset it was.

He wanted to try to tell the pokemon that it was okay, that he'd help it somehow, but he was tugged back, his vision changing again as he was suddenly back in the garden. The world looked different though, with the sky a bright purple and the trees an eerie shade of green that they weren't most of the time. Darkrai, in his full form, loomed in front of him.

Ash knew for certain this just wasn't a vision, this Darkrai was real.

His first instinct was to lash out, to throw a pokeball high in the air and command his friend to attack, but the pokeballs were empty, he knew that for a fact. He was completely alone against the legendary that seemed to be able to shape everything around him almost like it was -.

“Darkrai is said to make a person have nightmares. Most cases, people are trapped in their nightmares for only a short amount of time, but it varies. In the worst cases that were said to because by him, the victim is trapped in their nightmares and it ends up killing them. Parents often use it as a cautionary story, saying if good kids don't listen, Darkrai will visit them in their sleep.”

Brock's voice literally echoed through the air, and Ash felt his breath catch in his throat.

“I'm in a nightmare.”

Darkrai was silent, watching Ash carefully, as if judging him, before it muttered, “Does it matter?”

“Huh?” Ash watched as it faded into the ground, revealing his friends standing behind where he'd been only moments before.

“Pikapi!” Pikachu called out to him, and the other four, and Ria, looked around, all relieved.

Ria looked around, grinning broadly. “Riori!”

“Ash!”

If he was caught in a nightmare, were they caught in a nightmare too? Ash didn't know. Maybe their minds were here with his, wherever here was. Still, he rushed towards them.

Then the ground started shifting, sinking in spots and vanishing all together. May started to fall, and Dawn grabbed her arm to help her, but both of them ended up toppling over the edge of the steadily disappearing ground, their screams echoing through the air.

“Dawn! May!” Ash cried out as Brock tried to see if they managed to grab onto something, but he too ended up falling. “Brock!”

“Ash!” Misty screamed, and he looked around towards her. Pikachu was holding onto Ria, and the two of them were being dragged towards a hole in the ground. Ash tried to move to them, but his legs wouldn't cooperate, frozen to the ground.

Instead, Misty shot forward and grabbed the two pokemon, but then she started to get dragged down. Seeing all three of them in peril, already haven lost Brock, May and Dawn, Ash managed to shake off what was holding him in place and ran towards them.

He grabbed Misty's arm, swinging himself around so that he was holding onto her with Pikachu and Riolu between them. The ground shifted like violent waves under them, but he wasn't going to let go. He wasn't going to let her fall again.

Instead, they all fell into the darkness together, two massive figures, one surrounded by blue light the other surrounded by pink, attacking each other above them.

Sky

Into The Towers

Ash's thrashing got worse the longer he was unconscious. Sometimes, he would fall completely still and silent, sometimes he would lash out violently, but most of the time, he shifted, tossed, turned, tensed up and twitched. Sometimes he would yell, but most of the time he just groaned and let out a small, fearful or pained sounds. With his face constantly twisted in a combination of pain and fear, it was enough to completely wrench Misty's heart.

The four of them were all still sitting in the room Ash was put in, Nurse Joy coming in frequently to check up on him. She didn't want to attach him to any machines yet, but warned them that if this lasted too long, she would be forced to hook him up to heart and brain wave monitors, as well as giving him muscle relaxants.

Ash's pokemon had all come out of their pokeballs, making themselves comfortable around their trainer's bed while Pikachu curled up, forcing himself into Ash's arms. Ria had been there earlier as well, but settled for climbing onto Misty's lap and cuddling with her. Misty truly did appreciate this, especially when he started to get worse.

May ended up in tears when Ash fearfully started calling out their names, and now both she and Dawn were leaning on either side of Brock, who was trying to soothe them and keep them calm like he would do for any of his actual little sisters. Misty wanted to cry, she really did, but she was going to keep on a brave face.

Ash would have wanted that.

Suddenly, Ria perked up some, her red eyes starting at Ash with interest. He shifted onto his side, muttering something under his breath as he squeezed Pikachu hard enough to startle the pokemon awake. Pikachu didn't do anything at first, just staring up at Ash with worried eyes.

"Rio ri riolu." Ria suddenly spoke up. Pikachu looked at her, looked at Ash, and then looked at her again with a nod. He moved closer to Ash, if that was at all possible, and before anyone could stop him, let out a powerful thunderbolt.

"Pikachu!" They all cried out, but that was nothing compared to Ash's cry of pain. Nurse Joy rushed into the room, looking highly alarmed as the electricity faded away.

Ash's tense body went slack for a moment, but then he made a soft sound, and his eyes opened, staring down at his starter pokemon with confusion.

"Ash!" Misty held Ria close to her chest as she scooted her chair closer to the side of his bed. Ash looked up at her, his gaze still confused and groggy. For a moment, Misty feared that he didn't remember her, but then his eyes went wide.

"You didn't fall." Well, that was certainly a strange thing for him to say.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu was so relieved to hear his voice that he hugged him tightly. Ash returned the gesture, squeezing Pikachu a bit harder than he meant to, causing the pokemon to squirm and struggle.

"Let him breathe," Misty said with a laugh, forcing back the tears that threatened to well up in her eyes. Ash let go of Pikachu, sheepishly smiling up at her.

His smile faded as he slowly took in his surroundings. He turned over onto his back, looking at

Brock, Dawn and May with confusion, and then down at his pokemon. He sat up and asked, "What happened?" Seeing Nurse Joy and Chancey just made him even more confused. "Where are we?"

"The Pokemon Center," Dawn answered, her relief obvious.

"Pokemon Center?"

"You were having really, really bad nightmares," May told him. "After Darkrai attacked you."

The word nightmares made everything rush back to Ash. He could remember it all, the images he saw, the fear he felt, and just how empty everything was. Now he could feel life flowing from every person and thing in his room, as well as from the trees outside and the people downstairs. He never noticed it before, but now, the thought wouldn't go away. He never wanted to feel that empty again.

"I remember," he said after a moment. "How long was I out?"

"Well, you were attacked yesterday," Brock said with a sigh. "It's been almost 24 hours." He reached out, putting a hand on Ash's shoulder as he almost jerked up with shock. Though the younger boy struggled to actually move around, Brock managed to keep him in one spot long enough for him to give up and calm down a bit.

"Did you guys stay here the whole night with me?" Ash asked them, still a little flummoxed about how he could have been asleep for over 24 hours. The nightmares didn't seem to last that long, or were there things he already forgot?

"Well, we took coming down to sit with you so you wouldn't be alone," Brock explained.

"Misty was here almost the whole night until Brock carried her up, promising he'd stay down here. May and I had to camp in front of the door to make sure that she stayed there," Dawn added with a mischievous giggle, her blue eyes darting to the girl in question.

Misty's cheeks turned pink, and Ash just smiled at her warmly. That warm smile faded a bit as he tried to sit up more, though he moved slower so no one tried to stop him. Without the shock running through him, he could feeling a stinging pain attaching his chest. He looked down, touching the bandages that were there.

That motion seem to prompt Nurse Joy into action. She approached him with a kind smile, and said, "I'm just going to do a few tests to make sure you're okay, otherwise I'll have to transfer you over to the hospital."

"I'm fine," Ash insisted, still staring down at the bandages with confusion, "but what happened to my chest?"

"It's just bruised. You can take the bandages off if you like, but you might find it help a little to keep some pressure on it since your ribs might feel a bit tender. Take a deep breath for me." She put a stethoscope to his back, chuckling a little bit as he shivered as the cold metal met his warm skin.

His friends waited patiently as she did a few routine tests, getting through them quickly before nodding her head. "You're good to go, but take it easy. I imagine you'll be pretty tired later, most pokemon that recover from Darkrai's attack are. There's also a slight chance you might suffer from nightmares, but normal ones. Keep in mind, those are the symptoms for pokemon, so there is a chance that they'll be different in you."

Ash nodded his head, but stopped as a loud, gurgling sound could be heard throughout the room. He grinned sheepishly, placing a hand over his abdomen. "Well, you said it was late, so that means that I missed breakfast, and lunch!"

"Poor boy, wasting away," Misty teased him, poking his side very gently. "Look at you, all skin and bones."

"I am," he replied dramatically. "I don't think I can make it for much longer."

"Ri riolu." Ria sighed at him, rolling her bright red eyes.

"What have you been teaching my pokemon while I was asleep?"

Grinning again, Misty winked and then looked at the Riolu. "I was just showing her that there's more to life than being a dork, right Ria?"

"Ri!" she replied happily.

Ash rolled his eyes at Misty and his pokemon, but he didn't really argue or say anything. He kept a smile on his face, because he was happy to be awake and to see that all his friends were okay, and he wanted them to see that side of him.

They didn't need to know about how worried he actually was.

...

Ash wasn't as up and ready as he previously thought. Sore and rather tired, he sluggishly stumbled along after his friends as they did some sight seeing, mostly at his insistence, since they lost a . At first, they were all worried for him, but as soon as he started gorging on his hamburger with the same enthusiasm as May was, they knew that he'd be okay.

Needless to say, the two of them were finished first, and since they were waiting for Misty, Brock and Dawn to finish eating (picking daintily at their food, in Ash and May's eyes), they did the most natural thing: went for seconds.

There was an outdoor food court with many different places around it, some they recognized, some that they didn't. They took their time, wandering around and peering at some of the strange food.

"It's a good thing it's just us," Ash admitted as he made a face at some strange thing that might have been a stew but looked more like goop.

"Why's that?" May asked him, with the exact same expression on her face.

"We'd never hear the end of how shocked they are that we found food we don't like."

May laughed at that and they continued on their way. He was the one that insisted on having burgers earlier, using the 'I was unconscious for the past 24 hours' excuse. This time, he let her pick, and predictably enough, she chose noodles.

"You know, maybe I'll travel around Sinnoh after I'm done with Johto," May spoke up as they waited in the slow moving line for their food.

"Really?" Ash looked at her with interest. "Why here? There's lots of places with contests."

"I dunno. This place is just so different from Hoenn. Johto too. It's a bit colder and there's way more mountains. I just like it."

Ash laughed. "You've never been close to Mt. Silver, have you? Well, that whole mountain range north of Kanto is ridiculous. Most people don't go through there at all. Mt. Silver has the highest peak in Kanto and Johto though." The mountain itself was cut in half between the borders of the two regions, but it didn't matter. Very few ever went to the summit. At the bottom though was where the Silver Conference was held.

May thought about that for a moment. "Cameron Castle was close to there, wasn't it? The mountain range?"

"Yeah. That was at the beginning of it."

"And Mt. Silver. Isn't that where the Pokemon Master is rumoured to live?"

"Supposedly," Ash shrugged. "It's my goal to reach him one day though, so I guess I'll have to know for sure eventually." Realizing that they were off topic, Ash glanced at her again. "But the contests in Sinnoh have been interesting so far, so if you want to give this region a shot next, go for it! If I'm still hanging around here, you can always catch up with me!"

"I doubt you will be. By the time everything's done and I come here, you'll be fluttering off to whichever region you're off to next."

Ash laughed a bit at that, the laugh turning into a yawn. "Probably."

May's smile instantly turned into a worried frown. "You sure you're okay?"

"Just tired, but I'll be fine," he assured her, stretching out again. As he shifted, he moved enough for something to catch her eye. "Hey!" He cried out as she shoved him out of the way.

"Look!" May chirped happily, pointing at the sign on the wall behind him. "They're going to have fireworks tonight for the start of the contest! That's awesome! We'll have to go see it! If you can stay awake."

"Hey, I'll be wide awake!" He sent her a stubborn look. "You'll see!"

Getting their food, the two headed back to the table their friends were at, a bit surprised to see that they were still working away on their food. Even Pikachu, though he was just drinking a bottle of ketchup.

Ash never quite broke him out of that habit.

Ria tilted her small head curiously at Ash's food, having picked at some of his fries earlier. He moved some of the noodles onto a napkin and pushed it to her. The Riolu smelled it before taking a noodle and tasting it cautiously. A smile appeared on her face as she started eating the rest.

"Cutie," Dawn cooed at her, causing Piplup to pout.

Ash grinned at his Riolu, feeling quite proud of her. She was small and couldn't battle all that much yet, but she was eager to learn, happy, and energetic. Ria liked her small, practice battles with his newer pokemon, and with Pikachu, who was very good at toning down his power, depending on how strong his competition was. There was absolutely no fun or value in instantly knocking out an opponent, after all.

Even if she wasn't a battler yet, Ash knew she would be strong. Maybe it was the piece of Sir Aaron's Lucario that was reborn in her, but she was very instinctually good with controlling her own aura. Another breeder once commented on how shiny and bright her fur coat was, a sign that

she was being treated and raised very well.

Then again, all of his pokemon were. Sure, some of them weren't at their highest evolved forms, but he left that completely up to them. It didn't matter if it could put him at a disadvantage. If his pokemon wanted to remain as they were, like Pikachu and Bulbasaur, then he would never make them evolve. If they wanted to leave to pursue their own dreams, they could do that too.

He wanted to be the best, but if it meant hurting his friends, it wasn't worth it.

“Oh!” May slapped her hand on the table, startling everyone. “We need to find a good spot to watch the fireworks later!”

Dawn's eyes lit up. “Yes! I've heard it's amazing! Almost as good as that big theme park that's way over by the...” she trailed off, looking confused. “Unova? Yeah! The Unova region!”

“Fireworks sound fun,” Misty grinned at them.

“I bet I know how to find the best spots around,” Brock said, punching his fist down into his palm with excitement, a red tint to his cheeks.

“Tomorrow's when the preliminary rounds start, right?” Misty asked curiously as she leaned towards the two coordinators, completely ignoring Brock, though that wasn't actually intentional. “When do you two go on?”

“Not until tomorrow afternoon,” May said between bites of food. “Dawn's after me.”

“Mine's one of the last for tomorrow,” the younger of the two clarified. “That's good and bad. I just don't want them to be exhausted and ignore me.”

“I doubt they will. This is THE contest to be at, Grand Festival and Wallace Cup aside, right?” Misty winked at her. “Just do your best!”

“Yeah.” Dawn's bubbly attitude was instantly back, and Piplup mirrored that with a determined look. “We'll do our best, right Piplup?”

“Pip lup!”

Ash yawned suddenly, bringing all of the attention back to him. He stared at them with wide eyes before saying, “So, uh, Brock,” he looked at his older friend, “how do you plan on trying to find the best place to watch the fireworks?” If one more person asked if he was okay, he was seriously going to have a childish hissy fit.

A grin spread across Brock's tanned face. “You'll see.”

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As far as Ash could see, Brock's idea of finding them the perfect spot to watch the fireworks was simply to barrel through the crowded streets. Normally, he was all for just running ahead, but compared to when he first left the Pokemon Center, feeling like a bundle of energy to the point where he got fidgety, he was actually pretty tired now.

He wasn't going to go to sleep though, and not just because he wanted to see the fireworks.

As they walked through the streets to find a good place to watch the fireworks from, Ash couldn't help but cast Misty a confused look. She was clutching his hand tightly so they wouldn't get

separated, but that didn't really mean anything because all five of them had linked hands, Brock in front, with May, Dawn, Misty and then him (with Pikachu and Ria, of course), but she was squeezing his awfully tightly. Honestly, the way she was acting around him reminded him a bit of how she fussed over her baby pokemon, asking if he was okay or tired, checking to see if he was thirsty or wanted anything. It was confusing, and slightly annoying, but at the same time, it made him feel warm inside because he knew she was just acting that way because she cared.

“Up here!” Brock yelled to them, tugging their human chain along. It was only when they finally got through the crowd that the other four could see why he sounded so eager. Alice was waving to them from up on the roof of a house.

“Go inside and come up the stairs, there's a ladder coming up here!” she called out to them.

“I knew it!” Misty cried out, but it fell on deaf ears as Brock led them into the house. Breaking their human chain, the group headed up the stairs, finding the ladder that led up to the roof.

Letting the girls go up first, Ash leaned against the wall, and covered his mouth as he yawned again. Hearing something shift next to him, he was a bit surprised to see Brock giving him a worried look.

“Shouldn't you be gushing over Alice or something?”

Brock smiled slightly and shook his head. Most people would have found that entirely too rude, but to him, it didn't matter. “Come on now, you know I can put my friends first. Bros before hos!”

Ash tilted his head slightly. “Huh?”

“Uh...never mind.” He was not going to repeat that again, and he especially didn't want Ash going to Misty and asking her what it meant out of curiosity. There were times when his friend could seem a little naive, but that was simply because he wasn't exposed to certain terms all that much. Instead, Brock steered the conversation back to what he originally wanted to talk about. “How are you?”

He didn't even hide his annoyed look, because no matter how old he got, Brock had his way of prying the truth out of him. Really, Ash's only male role model when he was younger had been Professor Oak, but then Brock came along and he found himself wanting to be more like his friend, in some ways more than others (others being his obsession with women). That also gave Brock a little more influence over him, to reign him in when few others could, although Misty too developed means of doing that, just in entirely different ways. Early on, that was mostly yelling, mocking and challenging, but now it was yelling, mocking, challenging and puppy dog eyes.

Sighing, Ash completely let his mask fast, slumping down slightly. “I'm exhausted.”

“Maybe you should go back to the Pokemon Center and get some sleep.”

“No, I'm okay.”

Brock raised an eyebrow, observing him in that way that made Ash think he could read his mind. “I guess you wouldn't be able to, with the fireworks, but that's not why, is it? You don't want to have another nightmare.”

Ash put his hands on his head. “Seriously? Stop reading my mind. It's creepy. How do you even do that?”

“You're an open book most of the time.” Brock laughed and clapped his hand on Ash's shoulder. “I

can't promise that you won't have nightmares, but if I hear you, I'll wake you up. You'll be no good to anyone if you get sleep deprived. Now, lets get up there before your crazy girlfriend comes down to yell at us.”

“You just want to see Alice.”

“That may or may not be my motivation. Now move.”

Ash chuckled and shook his head. “Thanks Brock.”

“Don't mention it.”

The two climbed up, getting Alice happily as they did.

“Come on, they'll be starting any minute.” She clapped her hands together. “I normally watch the fireworks alone, well, aside from Chimchar, that is.” She nuzzled her loyal pokemon, who then jumped off her shoulder to go talk to Pikachu, Riolu and Piplup.

“You don't watch them with Tonio?” Dawn asked, sounding almost disappointed.

“No. He always gets wrapped up with his work.” Her annoyed tone wasn't lost on any of them. It faded quickly, and being replaced with a much more familiar, happy, smile. “The fireworks should be starting soon, and you guys have a great spot!” She sat down close to the ledge.

The rest of them followed suit, and almost instantly, Brock started flirting with Alice, only pausing when the fireworks started to explode in the sky, bells chiming from the Space-Time Towers in a happy tune.

May and Dawn whispered to each other and giggled happily, both clearly enjoying themselves.

Ash stared at the flashing colours in the sky, wanting to be just as enthralled as Dawn and May obviously were, oohing and aahing at every explosion in the sky. He just felt so, so tired.

He felt a smooth finger push his hair out of his eyes, and blinked towards Misty in surprise. She shook her head with a smug, knowing smile on her face. “Hey, just lay down. Right here. It's alright.”

“You want me to sleep on Alice's roof?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“It's flat. You won't fall.”

“It won't be comfortable.” A yawn escaped his lips. “Seriously, don't worry about me.”

Misty thought on that for a moment, he could almost see the gears twisting in her mind, tilting his head slightly when a pretty, pink blush appeared on her cheeks. For a split second, she seemed almost shy, but once she actually met his exhausted brown eyes again, the stubbornness that he was so familiar with came back. She tugged his arm to drag him closer to her before pushing on his shoulder. “Lay your head on my lap.”

“Huh?” Now his cheeks turned pink.

“I don't mind.” Misty insisted.

Ash hesitated, and maybe if he was in his right mind and not so utterly exhausted, he might have been more embarrassed, but he yawned again, and just like that, all of his effort to actually stay awake left him.

The young teenager slumped down beside his girlfriend, resting his head on her legs. He glanced up at her as she pulled his hat from his head, smiling and looking quite pleased with herself.

Misty ran a hand through his hair, something his mother shared with her once, saying that it always calmed him down when he was younger for some reason. Ash smiled at her gratefully before looking back towards the fireworks, eyes slowing fluttering closed despite the loud bangs and the flashes of light. "Night Mist," he muttered.

"Night," she replied with a smile on her face, and that was the last thing he remembered as he lulled off to sleep.

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"Morning sleeping beauty."

"Haha," Ash laughed dryly at Brock as he stretched his arms over his head, cracking his back in the process. "You're hilarious." He held his arm out to Pikachu, who hopped up, climbing to his regular perch on Ash's shoulder. Ria swung her arms back and forth a few times, like she was trying to use them to gain momentum, and then jumped up at him. A real laugh escaped Ash as he caught the small pokemon, and she nuzzled her face into his vest.

"You seem better," Brock noted, his approval obvious.

"I feel better," Ash admitted with a grin. "If I had any nightmares, I don't remember it." He looked around, brown eyes studying the busy lobby of the Pokemon Center. "Where'd the girls go?"

"Went ahead to scope out some of the merchant stalls and everything for homemade trinkets. You wanna grab something to eat then head out? They already ate." Brock paused for a moment.

"Never mind, that was a stupid question. Come on, the breakfast is free because of the contest."

The two boys eagerly ate their fill, Ash giving Pikachu and Ria little slices of bacon and a tiny pile of eggs that Pikachu slathered in ketchup. Ash probably could have gone for seconds, thirds or even fourths, but Brock insisted that they get going to catch up with the others. He'd just have to eat a big lunch instead.

They found Dawn, May and Misty out on the square in front of the Space-Time towers, talking to Alice as Dawn held something up in the air. She was the first to notice them approaching, grinning broadly as she practically skipped over to them. "Look at this." She held up a small charm that had a green and yellow feather on it. "It's called a Lunar Wing and is said to ward off nightmares! I figured we could use one!"

Ash laughed and ruffled her head, causing her to pout as a few strands of her long, blue hair fell out of her clips and hat. Dawn was quick to tuck them back in, and stuck her tongue out at him. "No nightmare-stopping charms for you then."

He shook his head as the other three girls walked towards them, Misty giving him a worried look that turned into a satisfied one, probably because he didn't look dead on his feet this time. Still, the mention of nightmares made him think back to what he saw.

Ash could still hear the noise that creature – a pokemon – made. It was so hard to explain, like it was a sound that was never meant to be heard. Powerful and eternally echoing, but high and sad too. He frowned a bit and said, "I hope that does work." Forget the nightmares of his friends falling, just the confusion he felt trying to make sense of the sound the pokemon made was enough to give him a headache.

“You okay?” May asked, leaning forward slightly to stare at him.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he assured her with a wave of his hand, completely honest because he did feel pretty good. He looked up as chimes echoed through the air in a song that was much different from the one that accompanied the fireworks the night before. He looked up at the tall towers that they were slowly walking towards. “Can we go inside?”

“Of course we can,” Alice laughed. “Actually, would you guys like to see the contest hall before it gets busy later today? No one’s supposed to go in there yet, but I have connections.”

“Yes!” Both May and Dawn cheered loudly. Misty and Brock just exchanged bemused looks, because who were they to deny the two eager girls a chance to see the legendary contest hall that was used only once a year.

Alice went and spoke to one of the stern security guards at the door, and then motioned for them to follow her. The hallways were filled with statues of pokemon, beautiful plants and paintings of what some legendary pokemon. Ash laughed as they walked by a painting of Lugia.

“What’s so funny?” Alice asked him.

“Lugia’s not all silver,” he pointed at the picture. “And they have longer necks than that too.” That interpretation of Lugia showed it with a relatively short neck, and just the thought made him chuckle again.

“Really? How do you know?”

“Oh, I met Lugia. More than one, actually.” He shrugged at the rather stunned look on her face. Sometimes Ash forgot that most legendary pokemon were called that not only because of their amazing powers, but because many had never been seen by people before and only lived on in stories. “Hey, is Darkrai a legendary pokemon?” He took out his own pokedex to answer that, because even if the entries were minimal on legendary pokemon, often not having an actual image of them, there would still be something there. “Oh, it just says the legend Brock told us.”

“Not so much a legend though, is it?” The young man asked, referring to the fact that Ash suffered from Darkrai’s nightmares himself.

“Yeah...” Ash trailed off, but he didn’t get to think much on that as they entered the contest hall. Instead, his eyes went wide and he could only gape at it. “Wow.”

“Oh my gosh!” Dawn all but squealed, clapping her hands together excitedly. “It’s beautiful. Have you seen ones like this before, May?”

“I’ve seen impressive ones, but this is something else,” the brunette replied with a shake of her head as her sapphire eyes tried to take everything in.

“If only my sisters could see this,” Misty spoke up.

Ash knew what she meant. The room was absolutely massive, with tall, shining pillars and a huge stain glass window up above the two giant televisions, one that would show the coordinators stats as the contest went on, the other would show the action itself so everyone could see better. There were rows upon rows of comfortable looking seats in the permanent bleachers, covered with red and green fabric. The seats for the contestants were on the floor, with soft, pale blue fabric over it. The floors were made of shining, almost gold-coloured marble, and up high beyond the bleachers were rows of smaller stain glass windows, filling the room with different colours bouncing off of every surface, even the huge streamers that were everywhere.

“Too bad I couldn't do something like this at home,” Misty added with a small sigh.

Ash shook his head, shifting Ria into one arm, and put his hand on her far shoulder to get her attention. “You could do awesome things with water and ice though, and your gym is pretty cool as is.”

She thought about that for a moment and then smiled, nodding her head as she took a sidestep closer to him. He looked at her with confusion, but she just grinned so he didn't question her.

Though May and Dawn could have stayed there for a while to explore the hall, Alice led them off down another hall. Though he wasn't one to really notice details in architecture, he had no interest in that, Ash had to admit that he was still impressed by the interior of the Space-Time Towers so far. Everything had small details to it, and everything was just so big.

Ria tried to squirm out of his grasp a few times to look at some things, specifically shiny objects they passed by, but he never let her. Ash really didn't want to owe anyone here anything, because he was positive it would all be expensive.

“This here is the center of the towers,” Alice said as she motioned to the massive room that they entered. “This is where the front doors take you.”

“Pi?” Pikachu jumped from Ash's shoulder, running up a set of stairs to look at a huge carving.

Ria squirmed in Ash's arms again, and as Dawn's Piplup and Alice's Chimchar rushed after Pikachu, he sighed and said, “Don't break anything.” Then he let the little pokemon run after them.

“That's exactly why I don't have Azurill out,” Misty noted. “She would end up breaking something just because she bounces everywhere and gets so excited over everything.”

Ash snorted at the mental image of the little pokemon going out of control and smashing into everything. They followed the pokemon over to look at the carved mural, and he had to admit it was amazing.

It took him a moment, but he realized that it both sides were almost like a mirror image, with corresponding pokemon that were said to be related to one another in one way or another. In the center of it was a tree, where a young girl was portrayed playing a leaf whistle with a Plusle and Minun. Underneath were intricate designs with decorated circles in them.

“This place is amazing,” Brock admitted, “and I see the connection to pokemon and nature but...space and time?”

Alice laughed and said, “I'll show you.”

She led them just outside of a tall tower where, inside, there were spinning bars and rings of metal, all whirling around one another and the pink pearl-like decorations on them. “This is the space tower. Those orbs are said to move smoothly as long as nothing's wrong with space, though I think that's only an old tale, because nothing has ever happened to anything in there to make it act oddly. It's working as well as it did when Godey designed it.”

She then led them to the opposite side of the massive room to yet another archway. “And this is the time tower.” In that one, large pendulums swung back and fourth at different rates, smooth, what looked like almost blue tinted diamonds glittering from within them.

A fond smile appeared on Alice's face, and she said, “The architect who designed this, Godey, was Tonio's great grandfather.”

“Really?” May asked curiously. “So, does he own this place?”

“Technically yes. However, the Alamos Town government is the one who hires the people to work here and to keep it in tip-top shape. The only things Tonio requested was that his laboratory in the basement be untouched and the towers themselves never be damaged or altered. Not that anyone would ever try.”

Dawn's eyes suddenly went wide. “We should go downstairs and visit him then!”

Ash looked over at her warily, because there was a glint in her eyes that he already knew spelled trouble. Alice didn't know that though, pushing up her sleeve to look at her watch and then nodded her head. “That's actually a good idea. I check up on him from time to time. Follow me.” She led them down yet another hall, and Ash was beginning to wonder just how many halls, stairs and rooms were in this place.

“I know what she's doing,” Misty said as they went down a set of stairs hidden behind a door.

“Who?”

“Dawn,” she shook her head. “Trying to play matchmaker with Alice and Tonio.”

“Oh.” Ash thought about that for a moment. “Why?”

“Seriously? You're really going to ask me that?” Misty deadpanned.

“I get that they like each other,” Ash rolled his eyes. “I'm not ten anymore. But, why's it her business?”

Misty huffed. “You're still clueless about girls.”

“I am not.”

“Are too.”

“Are not.”

“Are too.”

“Don't start!” Brock swung around and pointed his finger at them. “This place echos and you two can get loud when you get going.”

Completely in sync, they turned their glares from one another to him.

May giggled from behind Brock as Alice knocked on the door that they had reached just as Ash and Misty started arguing. Dawn tilted her head and looked at May curiously. May waved her hand and said, “They're hilarious. They're glaring at each other, but they kept holding hands the whole time.” She didn't even try to lower her voice, and Ash felt a blush creep up his cheeks, his glare vanishing as he realized it was true.

“Tonio?” Alice called out, instantly distracting all five of them. She pushed the doors opened, revealing a room lined with books and computers, and walked inside. “Honestly, he's so messy, where is he?”

Ash tilted his head with confusion, because he could feel Tonio's presence behind the polished desk that was piled high with books and discarded papers. He was also pretty sure that the man was asleep, but he didn't know how that could be comfortable on the stone floor.

“Tonio!” Alice cried out with alarm when she finally spotted him, rushing over to him and dropping to her knees beside him. She sounded so worried that Ash wanted to point out that he was just sleeping, but he didn't think that conversation would go all that smoothly unless he explained that he had crazy rare powers that allowed him to 'feel' stuff like that.

That wasn't going to happen. He didn't even want Dawn to know.

Tonio's eyes opened, and he looked up at Alice with a smile. “Oh, Alice. Good morning.”

She stared at him blankly before sitting up straight and letting him fall back to the floor with a thud. “Well, don't sleep on the floor.”

“Sorry,” Tonio said sheepishly as he pushed himself up off of the floor, stretching out. He caught sight of Ash and said, “Hey, glad to see you're okay. You know, I found a reference to the nightmare in Godey's diary last night. You're lucky, I wish I could have a nightmare.”

“Seriously?” Ash asked slowly, feeling a little bit of anger build up in him. Firstly, there was no way Tonio could know anything about his nightmare. If he had been talking about specifics in his sleep, he was sure that Brock or one of the girls would have asked him about it by now. Secondly, why anyone want to have a nightmare was beyond him.

“Not only that,” Tonio completely ignored Ash, pulling something out of one of the books and handing it to Alice. “I found a picture of your grandmother with Godey.”

Alice took it and stared at the picture curiously before smiling. “Grandma Alicia.”

“She looks just like you,” Dawn said, and she was right, the picture was absolutely uncanny.

“Everyone's always told me that. This is the first picture of her I've seen from when she was younger though,” Alice said, her eyes watering slightly. “I'm named after her too.”

“What's on the back?” May asked curiously, standing in a position that let her see that there were some sort of scribbles. She looked down at the pokemon as they rushed by her legs, but didn't give them a second thought.

Alice flipped the picture over, confusion appearing on her face as she traced the decorated, leaf pattern at the bottom of it. “It's music.”

Ash was about to comment, when there was a commotion behind them. He looked around just in time to see Piplup flip a huge disk over. Pikachu ended up catching it, but stumbled back towards Ria. The yellow pokemon almost got his footing, but then tripped over a thick cable and the disk went flying up. Ash rushed forward, grabbing onto it before it could land on the baby pokemon. “Careful, both of you.”

Pikachu looked up at him sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head and then saying something to the Riolu. She just let out a happy coo and patted Pikachu's head, a sign that she wasn't angry.

He sighed at his pokemon and shook his head, putting the disk back onto the object it came from, though he had to fiddle with it a bit before it clicked in place. Ash looked up, seeing other objects the same lining the walls. “What are these?”

“Music discs,” Alice said with a laugh.

“Excuse me?” Ash knew what CDs looked like, his mother had some from when she was younger, but he had never seen anything like this before.

Tonio held his hand up towards the ceiling and said, "That's how the tower's music is able to play."

"Oh!" Dawn cried out, startling everyone enough to make Ria cling to Ash's leg. "Can I try it?"

Tonio and Alice stared at the young girl, bemused expressions on their faces as they exchanged a look. "Well," Tonio said, "to do that, we'll have to go all the way to the top of the tower."

Dawn laughed, putting a hand over her chest. "No need to worry!"

"Pip! Piplup!" Her pokemon mimed her hand movement.

"Alright," Tonio laughed. "Don't say I didn't warn you though."

Ash looked at him curiously, not really understanding what they meant by that, but figuring that he'd find out soon.

Sky

The Secret Of The Towers

Stairs. What Tonio had been warning them about was an endless spiral of steel stairs.

Dawn was carrying the disc that she chose to play, shifting it in her arms. It wasn't heavy, but it was very awkward to keep a hold of in their mile long trek. "Me and my big mouth."

"Want me to carry it for a bit?" May asked her, letting out a slight huff of exhaustion. She was used to traveling, but they weren't even half way up yet and her legs were already burning. A year ago, she would have collapsed and demanded that they take a break, but she was going to tough it out. "We can take turns."

"Thanks," Dawn's relief was obvious as she gave the disc to the other coordinator. "This is ridiculous. Do you do this every time you want to change the music?"

"We don't have much farther to go. Alice has a balloon set up there," Tonio explained. "We can use that to go the rest of the way. We only change the songs so often, of if it's a special occasion, so I usually don't walk all this way."

"That's a relief," Misty moaned. "I haven't walked this many stairs in a long time." She paused. "Or ever, now that I think about it."

Ash chuckled and Misty and looked back at Dawn, who was the walking image of pure misery at that moment. Wanting to get the younger girl's mind off of the task at hand, he nudged her slightly, grinning all the while. "Race you up to the balloon."

Her tired eyes turned into competitive ones as she said, "You're on!" Without any warning, the two of them starting running up the stairs, Pikachu and Piplup running after them as Ria held onto Ash's hair tightly to stay on his shoulder.

Ash had longer legs, so he could skip a couple stairs at a time, easily getting ahead of Dawn, but that was hardly any fun, so he slowed down to make them more evenly matched.

The young girl let out a gasp as her foot slipped in one of the gaps and she stumbled forward, but Ash managed to grab her, yanking her up the last couple stairs until they were finally at the platform with the hot air balloon, startling the Pidgey that flocked there. "You okay?" He could barely hear his own voice over the cooing of the pokemon and the flapping of their wings as they took off into the sky.

She gave him a thumbs up as she breathed heavily to catch her breath. "No need to worry."

"Ri riolu ri." The Riolu pointed at the Pidgey that came back, jumping off of his shoulder, though Ash kept a close eye on her so that she wouldn't fall over the side. She moved slightly closer to them, smiling broadly when one flew up into the sky. Ria clapped her paws together, and then started bounding up the stairs after it.

"Ria!" Ash cried out, running after his pokemon.

"Pipi! Pikapi!" Pikachu exclaimed and took off after both the baby pokemon and his trainer.

"I need to stop taking good care of you guys," Ash panted out to Pikachu as he ran up the stairs. The little pokemon was laughing, jumping ahead of them and following the Pidgey, who was young and seemed quite eager to play. Ash caught sight of them a few times, and he knew that

they were just having fun, but this was a massive tower. He was fine for most of the way up so far, but he could feel his legs starting to strain and ache.

The Riolu remained just out of his reach the whole time. He never got the chance to grab her, and she was never where he could use his pokeball to pull her. Needless to say, Ash was getting really, really frustrated with her.

This must have been what it was like for his mother once he realized that he was naturally a very good climber.

“Ash Ketchum!” A younger Delia's bright brown eyes flashed up at her son with frustration. “Get down from there right now.”

“But I wanna see the Caterpie, mama!” Ash called back as he pulled himself up another branch. He watched the Mankey at Professor Oak's house climb really high and really fast, and he wanted to do that too. He was much better than Gary or Leaf, so naturally, that meant that he had to rub it in everyone's face.

“You'll fall!”

“I no—.” Just as she predicted, the branch snapped and four-year-old Ash Ketchum plummeted to the ground. A broken arm and being grounded from playing with Gary and Leaf for a week taught him his lesson. Only climb when mom wasn't there to growl at him and distract him.

“I think I need to apologize to mom,” Ash said to Pikachu, as he came out of the memory, stumbling a bit and holding onto the metal frames of the tower they were in. He briefly wondered why there was only a metal frame with no glass on it. Ash wasn't afraid of heights, but looking over the side still made him feel a little bit woozy, because it would be so easy to fall from there.

“Pi pikapi,” Pikachu agreed with him. He was just as energetic and active as he trainer, but even he was feeling exhausted.

Ash stopped climbing for a moment to pick Pikachu up and put him on his shoulder. It was more weight for him, but it was better than both of them burning out. He kept going up, but it was getting harder and harder.

Finally, after rounding another corner of the spiral staircase, Ria came into sight. Ash let out a sigh of relief that got caught in his throat half way. She was balancing on one of the metal bars, waving at the Pidghey she had been playing with, swaying back and fourth with the breeze.

“Ria!” He yelled as he found the energy to dash up a few more stairs. “Get down from there!”

Startled, the Riolu looked at him with wide, red eyes, jumping back inside and to the stairs. Ash flopped down beside her, panting for a moment before he picked her up, holding her close as Pikachu laid on the stair above his head. She must have been able to feel how angry and upset that he was with her, because he could certainly feel the guilt and sadness coming from her.

“You don't run like that,” Ash breathed out. “When I say come back, you come back. Do you understand me?” Though he was still panting, the anger in his voice was obvious.

“I just wanted to play.”

“I know you did,” Ash sighed. “You have to listen though. And jumping up on that? That was even worse! What if you fell? What if the wind picked up and I couldn't catch you in time?” There was almost a bit of hysterics to his voice as he asked the last question.

Her pointed ears almost flattened against her head. "Sorry."

"Pikapi," Pikachu cooed, nuzzling Ash. "Pika pi pi ka pikachupi pika pikachu."

"I know," Ash shook his head at both of them. He put his hand on his chest, where Darkrai had hit him, feeling a bit of an ache. "I think I'm just going to sit here for a few minutes."

"Ash!"

He lulled his head to the side, looking out the side of the tower. A hot air balloon rose up, all of his friends staring at him as it went up.

"You okay?" Misty called out to him.

"I'll catch up in a minute!" He called out, waving at them. Pikachu just raised a hand in recognition, and Ria waved at them almost sheepishly. Once the balloon was almost to the top, Ash groaned and pushed himself up. "You're not going anywhere this time." He kept Ria in his arms and Pikachu climbed on his shoulder again, as he made his way up the stairs.

"Why don't you use your aura?"

"Huh?" He looked down at Ria with confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Well, that's what I was doing. There's aura everywhere so I used it to help me jump farther and run faster. You just push or lift yourself with it."

"Push yourself?" Ash repeated slowly. It sounded very vague, but he understood what she meant by pushing, lifting and things like that when it came to aura. He pushed outwards to create a shield, pulled the energy in to create an aura sphere, and there was so much more that he didn't know.

Those moments his little Riolu did know things that were beyond him were the moments that Ash was reminded that she had a piece of another Lucario living on in her.

Figuring it wouldn't hurt to try, no one else was there to see it, Ash tried to use his own aura to figure out what she meant by pushing. He jumped once but just stumbled, a second time was just a regular jump, the third time his face almost smashed into the stairs.

Pikachu was laughing at him, and Ria sniggered.

"No! Push! Like...umm...that pushy water that moves people!"

"Pushy water...waves?" Ash repeated. That was a little more specific. He could feel the aura in things around him, no matter how high up he was in comparison. Gathering like a wave, and then -

Ash yelped as he pitched forward much farther than he expected, crashing into the metal structure and wincing as Pikachu grabbed onto him with his teeth to stay on his shoulder. Ash caught his breath and then laughed happily. "I did it!"

Again and again he tried jumping up the stairs, moving faster and with much more ease when he was controlling the aura around him to help him go. After the first couple times when it seemed like Ash was going to go right over the side of the stairs, Pikachu and Ria started enjoying themselves, and he reached the top much quicker than he expected to.

Once he got going though, up to where there were finally steel walls around him, Ash realized that he would need to stop before someone saw him. That proved to be more difficult than he

anticipating, crashing into the wall and almost falling back down the stairs again.

“Well, here's our own beacon of hope,” Brock chuckled, looking down over a railing at him. He obviously just thought Ash stumbled and fell, but he could think that for now.

“Ha ha, funny,” Ash panted as he made it the rest of the way up.

“Have a good run?” May teased him.

“Yeah, the next time someone tries that, she's going back in her pokeball.” Ria looked up at him with innocent eyes.

“Come on, Tonio's just showing us how the tower works!” Dawn called out to him from where she, Misty, Alice and Tonio were standing.

Ash left out a huff of air as he walked over. The aura made it much, much easier to get up the rest of the stairs, but his legs still felt like jelly. Without any form of embarrassment, he basically slumped onto Misty, using her as a human crutch, whether she wanted to or not.

The redhead just rolled her eyes but kept him up.

Tonio twisted a lever around and they watched the discs rotate. “Normally, it's set to play automatically on the hour. But if there's something special you want to play...” He trailed off, stepping on a pedal on the floor to pop out the disc that was there.

Alice took it off and finished his sentence for him. “You put in the discs you need.”

“Great!” Dawn said cheerfully as she walked over, placing the disc on it and moving it around a bit until it fit in the groove.

“You'd think something like this tower would be more...” May trailed off, silently searching for the word she was looking for.

“Complicated?” Misty suggested.

“Sure, we'll go with complicated,” she nodded her head. “It's just so big.”

“Godey was known for making his designs and details very intricate, but this aspect of it is incredibly simple so anyone could use it,” Tonio told them.

Dawn pushed it down into the space, and looked around. “Shouldn't it be playing?”

Alice laughed and turned to Brock, holding out the disc that they just took out of the machine. “Would you hold this for me?”

“Sure!” It didn't matter if Tonio was right there, Brock was overly eager to help.

Alice didn't seem to notice, turning to another lever and pulling it all the way down, grunting a bit from the strain of pulling it down. Electricity coursed through the machine, and all of the levels and gears started clanking and spinning. A moment later, a cheerful tune of bells echoed from both the space and time towers.

“It's beautiful,” Dawn said happily, clasping her hands together and closing her eyes as she took in the tune.

“This tower is also the world's largest musical instrument, though they tend to keep that out of the

travel guides,” Tonio informed them with a laugh.

“When the music starts, a lot of the time people will just drop what they're doing and start dancing or just listen to it,” Alice added happily.

“This place is pretty cool,” Ash said as he gazed around the room. “In a strange way.”

“Like it's in it's own place and time,” Misty agreed. Ash shrugged, because he wasn't quite sure if that's what he himself meant or not.

“Well,” Alice said after a moment, “there's really nothing else to see up here, so we should probably head back down.” She walked into the direction of the balloon, but then smiled at Ash. “Unless you prefer walking.”

“Oh Mew, no,” Ash groaned, getting laughs from all of his friends except for Pikachu. The electric-type was usually the first one to giggle at harmless misfortune that his trainer suffered through, but he happened to be on his side this time.

Even as they started to descend in the crowded balloon, the music floated through the air, making everything seem much more bright and cheerful. They could see people laughing and dancing to the tune, clearly enjoying the not-so-little secret that their town kept hidden.

“Want to come with us, Tonio?” Alice asked him curiously as they got out of the hotair balloon one by one. “Get something to eat?”

“Oh, well...” Tonio blushed a bit and shrugged, looking down almost bashfully.

“Well, look who we have here?”

The already large group looked around to see Maury, Kai and Allegra standing, all with excited grins. “Who's up for another battle, with different opponents this time?” Kai suggested.

“I want to give it a go!” Dawn cried out, pumping her fist in the air. Piplup mocked the movement, looking just as eager.

“Me too!” May agreed, pointing at the trio. “My pokemon could use some practice!”

“You go, Brock,” Misty said with a little grin.

Brock stared at her curiously before chuckling and shaking his head. “Right. You two behave.” He walked over to where the others were, leaving Ash and Misty with Alice and Tonio.

“I wanted to battle,” Ash pouted as he glanced at Misty. “Why couldn't I go instead?”

“Cause you're going to stay here with me,” she stared at him as if that should have been completely obvious.

“Why would I want to do that?” There was more of a teasing tone to his voice than anything else, because he wasn't quite as oblivious as he seemed. It just took him a couple extra seconds to realize what she wanted.

Misty sighed and pulled his hat down over his eyes. “You're such a dough-head sometimes, I swear.”

Ash pushed his hat back up, setting Ria onto the ground, and grinning at her. “Yeah, but you still like me.”

“I should probably be put in a nut house for that.”

“I could think of a lot of other reasons you'd belong in one of those.”

Misty glared at him, but it was such a beautiful day, and aside from Ria's little escape, nothing terrible had happened. She was in too good of a mood to really be mad with him. “Oh, shut up and just hold my hand.” She reached out, wrenching his hand into hers roughly. He just chuckled a bit, weaving his fingers with her own and squeezing her hand.

“Are't they adorable?” Alice asked Tonio with a laugh.

He looked at them almost curiously. “Well, I suppose? I mean, it's none of our business”

Alice just sighed, crossing her arms in front of her chest and turned back to watch the battle.

Brock and Sudowoodo were battling Maury, while Dawn and Buizel were taking on Allegra. May stepped up to take on Kai, releasing her Blaziken, despite the partial type advantage.

Ash watched with keen eyes, feeling quite proud of May in particular. Brock had always been a good battler (he wasn't a Gym Leader for nothing), and Dawn was doing really well, even though she was just a newer trainer, but May had grown quite a lot since he first met her over a year ago.

Then he completely lost focus on the battles, looking up towards the sky with a frown on his face. The he felt the hair at the back of his neck stand on end, and Ria stiffened in his free arm.

“What's wrong?” Misty asked him as she felt him tense up, glancing at where he was looking, though she saw nothing.

“I don't know...” He trailed off, because he had no idea what was wrong, but it felt similr to the rippling waves of power hit them before.

Tonio suddenly jerked beside them. He looked down at a device in his hand and muttered, “Again?” Without another word, he turned and ran back towards the Space-Time Towers, presumably to his lab.

“Tonio!” Alice cried out, worry lacing through her voice. She glanced at them for a moment, her eyes falling to their intertwined hands. Her mouth narrowed into a straight line as she turned and ran after Tonio.

None of their other friends noticed the strange flurry of motions, too engrossed by their battles, but now Misty was more than just a bit confused and concerned. She opened her mouth to ask Ash to describe what he thought was wrong, when a piercing, echoing sound rippled through the air.

Ash let go of Misty's hand and spun around, staring directly up at the sky with wide eyes. He knew that sound, it haunted his subconsciousness since Darkrai had given him that horrible nightmare.

An explosion of pale pink light rippled throughout the sky, originating from the spot where he felt something earlier that he couldn't explain. The pink lights that danced across the sky were overwhelming powerful, and the only thing he could compare the sudden surge of energy within him was when he first started unlocking his aura, when it would lash out without warning.

Everyone else stopped what they were doing, looking up at the sky with both confusion and worry.

“There's something up there,” Ash said, recognizing a sheer overwhelming presence that was at the center of the light. He couldn't physically see it with his eyes, but he could sense it with his aura,

and it powerful. Not only that, but it was huge and he had never felt anything like it before.

Except for in his dreams.

The light abruptly faded away, and the presence wasn't nearly as strong, but it was still there somewhere. Ash couldn't pinpoint it, almost like it was blending in with the space around them, but what was more unsettling than that was how wrong everything suddenly felt.

It was similar to when Doctor Young's mirage system messed with his aura, and he didn't like that comparison at all.

“What was that?” May burst out, shifting closer to Blaziken as she stared at the sky.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Brock shook his head with confusion. “I've never seen that happen before. What about you two?” That question was directed towards Ash and Misty. Though he had been with Ash for most of his journey, there was that one huge incident at Shamouti Island that he only got the bare basics of, so for all he knew, they had seen something like this before.

“No,” Misty shook her head. “I mean, I know a pokemon that uses pink energy for attacks but-.”

“It wasn't Mew,” Ash interrupted, certainty lacing through his voice. “I'm positive it wasn't Mew. They tend to be more...playful than this.”

Before anyone could question Ash about his knowledge of Mew (specifically Dawn and the three other trainers with them), a dark voice growled, “Go away!”

Ash spun around, instantly recognizing the presence that somehow snuck up on them. Darkrai rose up out of the ground, and the teenager was almost consumed by the anger and sadness that rolled off the pokemon in waves.

“Darkrai!” May gasped, and Dawn quickly pulled Piplup into her arms, holding him close. Brock shielded both of them, and Misty let out a dangerous growl from Ash's side.

“Ah ha!” They looked around as Baron Alberto arrived, dramatically throwing his pokeball up into the air. “Lickilicky!”

Neither the arrival of the robust, pink pokemon, nor the dark legendary himself, caught Ash's attention. No, instead it was the trio following Alberto around. The woman, dressed as a reporter with a blazer, skirt and microphone, had very familiar, long magenta hair, and there was no mistaking the man with them, especially not when considering the fact that the camera man was a Meowth.

“Leave it to the brave Baron to find Darkrai in a flash,” the woman said into the microphone.

“With such daring and dash!” The other two added.

If the look of them, along with the very familiar auras wasn't enough for Ash, that stupid rhyme was. The biggest blessing that came from his abilities was that, once he was familiar with Team Rocket, he could literally sense them coming and they rarely ever got the jump on them anymore. That never really deterred them, it just made them more creative with the strange robots that they came up with, but their costumes never fooled him anymore. There was no way the duo didn't know that, so they obviously weren't there for Pikachu.

“Are you kidding me?” Misty asked, obviously recognizing them as well.

“You children stay back!” Alberto cried out with a rather dramatic flare before looking down into the camera with a dashing smirk. He looked back towards Darkrai. “There is no escape!” He pointed at the legendary. “Lickilicky! Gyro ball!”

Lickilicky spun towards Darkrai, who simply leapt over him and landed on top of a peak on one of the houses, shadows stretching out and acting as two long legs. It called for no attack, simply raising its hand towards the sky and directing blue electricity at the pokemon.

Lickilicky stumbled and shook his head, glaring back up at Darkrai as it unleashed a Hyper Beam. Darkrai simply floated above that, a massive sphere appearing in his hands. This time, he called out an attack, his voice ringing through the air dangerously. “Dark Void!”

“Get back!” Ash recognized those all right, that was the same thing that hit him, but there was a lot of them. The patterns of how he threw them were erratic at best, completely missing Lickilicky as he charged, forward, slamming into the other pokemon around.

Sudowoodo was surrounded by a dark sphere, his body seizing up. Brock rushed to his pokemon, grabbing its heavy form and slumping to the ground. “Sudowoodo!”

May let out a gasp of a scream as she realized one was flying at her. In the split second before it hit, Blaziken threw himself in front of her. This time she really did scream as her starter fell to the ground. “Blaziken!” He was much too big for her to pick up, but she still fell to her knees and cradled his head.

Dawn stared at them both for a moment before glaring up at the dark-type. “Buizel! Use Water Gun!”

Buizel was much more of a battler than a contest-loving pokemon, and was eager to do what he could. A powerful jet of water shot in the air, but Darkrai was too quick. Once again, it unleashed its dark void attack, and a new wave of spheres flew through the air, slamming into the pokemon all around them, almost like they were locked onto them and not the people.

Dawn screamed, grabbing a hold of Piplup and shielded the tiny pokemon with her body. Almost like her scream snapped everyone out of their stunned stupors, screams erupted and people started running. Most grabbing their pokemon, but some actually leaving them behind.

Rumours and a singular attack were one thing, but this was unacceptable. Darkrai faded into the shadows again, but Ash knew where he was. He looked at Misty and passed her a wordless look, then he took off running with Pikachu on his shoulder.

“Ash!”

He completely ignored his girlfriend, determined not to lose Darkrai this time. He caught sight of the pokemon and focused on him. Pikachu was completely in tune with him, leaping into the air and aiming a powerful Thunderbolt where Ash wanted him to. Though Misty was the one Ash could communicate easiest with, his bond with Pikachu was strong that he rarely ever had to call out an attack for him anymore. Pikachu could sense what he wanted.

Darkrai grunted in pain, but he kept going.

Though the pokemon was much, much faster, Ash wasn't going to let him get away this time. He followed it down the twisting, winding roads and staircases, into a dark alley.

“He's close,” Ash muttered, but something felt off. He looked towards the wall, feeling something coming. It wasn't Darkrai though. What he saw actually made him take a few steps back in shock.

A transparent Bibarel surrounded by a sinister purple glow swam out of the wall and crossed the alley in front of him, disappearing into another wall.

Ash and Pikachu both just stared, and if there was ever a moment when a pokemon perfectly mimicked an expression from their trainer, it had to be that one.

“Please tell me you saw that,” Ash asked his pokemon after a moment.

“Pi pikachu pi.” Ash was trying to feel with his aura to see if that Bibarel was still going, and was so focused that he missed the shadow streaking across the walls above them. Pikachu's sharp eyes and hearing picked it up though, and his fur stood on end. “Pika!”

Ash didn't even look around, mentally thinking 'thunderbolt' again and again, hoping that it would work. Pikachu's ear twitched like he actually heard it, and he launched an attack at the shadow. Another small cry of pain was heard, and Darkrai rose up out of the ground.

“Use Volt Tackle!” Ash audibly commanded, and Pikachu launched himself at the legendary pokemon. Ash honestly thought that they'd land a hit, but then Darkrai multiplied and surround Pikachu.

“Double Team,” Ash groaned. Normally there were tricks at figuring that attack out, the copies were never quite as solid and they never actually had shadows, but Darkrai was so fluid as it was that it was nearly impossible to tell which one was real. Ash couldn't even pinpoint it with his aura, the images were moving too quickly so he could never pinpoint it down. It was almost like it was doing it on purpose.

Pikachu volleyed himself off the walls like a pinball, but his electricity never ended up hitting anything and he landed on the ground with frustration. “Pikapi!”

“Darkrai!” Ash yelled as he ran up to Pikachu's side. Attacking clearly wasn't going to work, and there was no time to think out a better plan. He reached out mentally with his aura, hoping that the pokemon could feel that he wasn't going to hurt it if it didn't hurt him. “You need to leave this place alone!”

“No!” His voice echoed, but surprisingly enough, he actually did reach back towards Ash, and once again, Ash could clearly feel the anger, the sadness, and the sheer fear coming from him. That last one threw him a bit. “I stay!” For a brief moment, Ash saw the same looming figure that he had seen in his dreams and in the sky.

Suddenly, he felt like he was really, really missing something, and that made him pause. Pikachu was about to jump again, but Ash shook his head.

Lickilicky suddenly waddled in front of him, and still followed by Team Rocket in disguise, Baron Alberto walked in front of him. “Let me handle this! He's mine! Lickilicky! Use Hyper Beam!”

“No, wait!” It was too late though. The attack rippled through the small alley, damaging the houses around them and not leaving a scratch on Darkrai at all. The pokemon summoned another dark sphere, this time hitting the Lickilicky with it.

It might have been judgemental of him, but Ash was legitimately surprised at the worry that appeared on Baron Alberto's face. It faded just as quickly as it appeared when he saw that Lickilicky was trapped in a nightmare. “Darkrai!”

The pokemon just stared at them, his blue eye glowing as he faded into the ground.

“Lickilicky! Get up!” Alberto demanded, shaking his pokemon.

“He's trapped in a nightmare,” Ash noted softly, though the Baron completely ignored him. Rolling his eyes, the teenager turned his attention to Team Rocket.

The trio stared at him, and he knew that they knew that he knew who they were. Ash was never quite sure what Team Rocket knew exactly, if they were aware of his aura or not (though they'd be well aware of how many legendary pokemon he met, having seen most of them as well), but he wasn't about to chance it.

That was why he didn't warn them before that Bibarel came back through the wall. Though the situation wasn't funny at all, their horrified faces were priceless, and Ash had to fight down a childish smug smirk.

Meowth filmed it, and Jessie asked, “An ultra rare pokemon?”

“That flies through walls?” The skepticism mingled with fear in James' voice.

“It can't be real,” Alberto said to them with a sigh.

Normally, Ash would condone any and all mockery of Team Rocket. They stalked him and often made his life hell while trying to steal his best friend, but he was standing right there too, and it was almost like Alberto was mocking him too. He glared at the man, about to say something, but the words faded as the strangest thing happened. Lickilicky started to glow as he thrashed, and though it wasn't visible to the naked eye, Ash could feel the power reaching out to Alberto, noting that it felt the same as the Bibarel.

That completely escaped him as Baron Alberto started to glow before he suddenly transformed into a Lickilicky.”

Ash blinked and his mouth fell open. Jessie stumbled back, staring with stunned horror as she choked out, “Maybe so, but can you explain what you're up to?”

“What?”

“The camera does add a few extra pounds,” Meowth mumbled.

Pikachu hopped up to Ash's shoulder and tilted his head. “Cha pi ka pikachu pi pika?”

“That's still Alberto,” Ash confirmed. “But I don't even...” Ash shook his head violently and said, “Shock me. Please. Just so I know I'm not in a nightmare again.”

Pikachu didn't even hesitate, letting out more than just a little shock that made Ash's hair stand on end and all of his muscles twitch. “Nope. Not asleep.”

Jessie laughed weakly at Alberto, who demanded to know what they were going on about. She reached into her pocket, pulling out a compact to show the Baron his appearance. Silence engulfed all of them before the man-turned pokemon yelled, “My royal tongue!”

“Are you serious?” Ash blurted out as he took off his hat and smoothed down his hair until it looked like the untamable mess it normally was. He intended on actually ranting, but as the light started to fade around them, he looked towards the sky instead. Thick grey clouds rolled in, covering all of Alamos Town with heavy shadows. It became dark, almost like night with only the street lights so people could see. Completely changing his thought process, Ash mumbled, “What's going on?” Storms didn't roll in this quickly – not in less than a minute's time.

“Pikapi! Pikachu pi pika pika!”

Ash's body stiffened, and James looked at Meowth. “Translation?”

“He says that Darkrai seems ta like the shadows more. We should get out of here,” Meowth answered, and it was a completely valid concern. Even if he could mingle in the light, Darkrai did seem to prefer the shadows, and now there was absolutely no natural light left in Alamos Town.

“We need to go find everyone else,” Ash told Pikachu, running past Team Rocket and Alberto. They weren't the problem right now. He just wanted to find his friends. The sooner the better, because Ash just knew that whatever was happening had barely begun.

Sky

Looking Through The Fog

Ash got to the Pokemon Center long before Team Rocket and Alberto, but he couldn't bring himself to enter. His friends were inside, he knew that, but so were all the pokemon that Darkrai had attacked. Their physical bodies were all living in agony, shuddering in nightmares that pulsed through their own, personal auras no matter how weak they were, and whatever the transparent versions of them were only added to the confusion. He hadn't even entered the building yet.

Not wanting anyone to ask why he wasn't there yet, he stayed out of sight, watching as Alice and Tonio ran inside with a Pidgey and a Murkrow. He couldn't avoid the place for long, especially not as Alberto, still turned into a Lickilicky, bumped up the road.

Someone had to explain what was going on, even if he had no idea.

Finally working up his nerve, Ash walked inside with Pikachu on his shoulder, moving quickly towards where his friends were. He almost paused again, wanting to turn around and go back outside when he saw May kneeling beside her fallen Blaziken, Brock with Sudowoodo and Dawn with Buizel. It wasn't just them though, there were so many different pokemon that were all laying in horrible nightmares.

Brock wasn't even flirting with the Nurse Joy as she knelt beside him, checking on Sudowoodo.

Misty was between the two girls and just happened to look up in his direction as he approached, probably expecting to see someone else coming inside with a twitching, unconscious pokemon. Her expression shifted to one of relief for a brief moment, before her sea green eyes narrowed. She stood up and stormed towards him, her cheeks turning red with anger as she prodded his chest with a finger. "Where were you? You're not just supposed to run off after a pokemon that attacked you before! Are you stupid? You should have waited for someone else to go with you! What if it attacked you again!" With every exclamation, her poking became a little rougher. No one else got up to interrupt her tirade, and that spoke volumes for both the fear of Misty's infamous temper, and that they probably agreed with her for the most part.

Ash grabbed the hand that was poking him and held onto it. "I'm fine, Darkrai didn't even try to hit me. I'm not the one with a problem." He looked over his shoulder as the large form of Lickilicky waddled into the room.

"No, you're most certainly not!" It was still strange hearing Baron Alberto's voice coming from the robust pokemon.

Everyone, including Nurse Joy, gaped at the Pokemon. Both Alice and Tonio stood up, staring with sheer surprise before Tonio dug out his laptop, but the silence was broken by Dawn. She pointed at him with alarm and cried out, "Since when can Lickilicky talk?"

"Pip piplup!"

"I am not Lickilicky!" he cried out, shaking his head as his tongue lolled out for a moment. He grabbed the golden sash that he had found somewhere and tugged on it. "I am Baron Alberto!"

"What?" Was the only clever response that May could give, blinking her big blue eyes with pure and utter confusion.

"It's true," Ash said with a wave of his free hand, the other still holding Misty's up between them. "I saw it happen myself!"

“Tonio!” Alberto yelled, storming over to the lavender-haired man. “Turn me back at once!”

“You act like Alberto,” Alice sighed with a shake of her head.

“Ri riolu ri,” Ria stood up from where she had silently been sitting with Piplup, jumping up onto Ash's shoulder to get a better view of the human-turned pokemon. She looked back around at something else. “Ri?”

Ash turned around and pointed at Team Rocket, as they stumbled in holding the real Lickilicky. The pokemon were unable return back to their pokeballs once Darkrai hit them, though he had absolutely no idea why. That left Team Rocket carrying Alberto's partner. “We saw it too!”

“Tea-.” Ash shook his head at Misty, realizing what she was about to say. She had always been more clever than him, able to pick out their disguises more often than he had before he unlocked his aura and was able to know they were there before even seeing them. There was no point in calling them out on their identities right now, they had more important things to deal with.

“Here's the real deal as proof,” James added as the three slumped over.

Tonio was looking at his laptop, typing rapidly on it while looking at the flying, transparent versions of the sleeping pokemon, and looking from Lickilicky to Alberto and back. He frowned, his brow furrowing as he mumbled, “The real world merging with the dream world.”

“What are you talking about?” Alice asked him, and Dawn, Brock and May all stood up, staring at him with rapt interest.

“The pokemon are dreaming. We know so little about what they dream, but considering what we know of Darkrai, and the way they're constantly moving and fleeing, that they are dreaming of being chased or something frightening like that,” Tonio shook his head. “Doctor Fennel in the Unova region as been making some breakthroughs with Pokemon Dreams lately, but I think even she'd be stumped about this.”

“What about me?” Alberto demanded. “Why am I like this and why am I the only one?”

“Well, there are a lot of things to consider. Maybe Darkrai did something to make this happen to you – you have been the one directly attacking him – or it could just be that Lickilicky is dreaming that he's you.”

“How is any of this possible?” Brock asked. “I've seen some pretty weird stuff, but this is something else all together.”

“Ash was attacked earlier too,” May pointed out, “but we didn't see anything weird like this with him.”

“Maybe because he's a human?” Dawn asked her, and May shrugged, having absolutely no way to know the answer of that.

“No, human and pokemon aren't different enough where this would affect one but not the other, after all, there has been a lot of research about how people evolved from pokemon as well – not the metamorphosis type of evolution that happens between say a Pichu, Pikachu and Raichu but how everything has an origin and Mew but then the species all branched out, including humans and then-.”

“Tonio,” Alice snapped her fingers in front of his face, “you're getting sidetracked again.”

“Right, sorry,” he shook his head. “Anyway, I think the reason this didn't happen to Ash earlier is because, well, you remember that pink light in the sky earlier?” Everyone nodded. “That caused something strange to happen. Alamos Town is being acted upon by a strange force that created a space-time anomaly, resulting in all of the strange things we've been witnessing.”

“A space-time anomaly?” Misty repeated slowly, squeezing Ash's hand slightly.

“I know how or why this is happening,” Tonio said with a shake of his head, “I don't have enough information yet to really answer exactly what this.”

“I'll tell you what's going on!” Alberto-Lickilicky threw his stubby arms into the air. “It's that Darkrai!” He put his hands on his robust stomach, like someone would put their hands on their hips. “Every time it shows up, weird things start to happen!” He waved one hand at Tonio. “Don't you see!”

Tonio looked up at him, his doubt obviously. “I suppose.”

Alberto seemed to catch onto that, turning around and stumbling over to the real Lickilicky, shaking him. “Lickilicky, I demand you wake up at once and go destroy Darkrai!”

“Hey guys?” James muttered, though Alberto didn't seem to take any notice. “What about our in-depth interview?”

Ash didn't have the patience or attention span to listen to whatever insane plan that they were trying to come up with that he was positive would just end up blowing up in their faces. Instead, his bright brown eyes turned towards the door as Maury, Kai and Allegra ran in.

“Guys, we're stuck here!” Allegra told them, brushing her dark hair.

“It's the craziest thing!” Maury blurted out, looking highly alarmed.

“We're trapped in town and we can't leave,” Kai clarified for his two younger friends.

“What do you mean you can't leave?” Brock asked them, brow furrowing.

“Come with us,” Allegra reached out and grabbed his arm, and almost instantly, Brock seemed to turn into a puddle of goop, letting her pull him along.

Everyone else exchanged uneasy looks until Nurse Joy spoke up. “Your pokemon will be safe here. You can go see what's going on.”

Ash nodded his head. “Alright.” He looked at the three girls and asked, “Coming or staying?” He wasn't going to blame any of them if they just wanted to stay there and wait out whatever was going on. Just because he ended up in this situations didn't mean that they needed to follow him into the belly of the beast.

He didn't really take into account just how stubborn all three of them were. Misty gave him a stern look that answered either she was coming or not, while May's eyes narrowed and Dawn nodded her head.

“Let's go then.” He wasn't going to argue with them, because Ash knew without a doubt that all three of them could take him out if he tried to protest.

...

As they reached the massive stone bridge that acted as the only way in and out of Alamos Town, Ash began to feel uneasy. Dense fog surrounded the city on all sides it seemed, and with the steadily darkening clouds over them, it was hard to see anything. The electricity wasn't even working, so people resorted to having fire pokemon either light up torches or walk with the trainers. The whole scene was incredibly eerie, and the fog was really bothering him.

That made him really irritable. A part of him hated always feeling the weird things happening around them, especially when he was still too unexperienced to really be able to pinpoint why. With the way he was training his pokemon and learning to silently read their auras, he was starting to get the sense of what he was feeling when it came to specific people, and he could tune them out as well, but this fog was something else.

"It's getting cold," Dawn said as she rubbed her arms.

"I know," May agreed, scooting closer to the other girl.

"Hmm..." Brock hummed in a displeased way, causing Ash to look back at him. Brock was looking at the two younger girls with a worried frown, his eyes flickering over to Misty in the same way.

Ash glanced over at the redhead, noticing that she was rubbing her arms the same way. The chilled prickle of the fog made the hairs on his arms stand up on end, and it only then occurred to Ash why Brock was frowning. All of the girls were wearing tanktops of sorts – Dawn's being a dress while May and Misty both had shorts on as well. He and Brock had tshirts with long sleeves, vests and pants, much more covered from this sudden onset of cold air.

Maury, Allegra and Kai led the large group of trainers that they were walking with to the very edge of the bridge where the fog all but consumed it. The female of the trio held her hand up before anyone could ask any questions, throwing a pokeball up into the air and releasing a Honchkrow.

"Now, Honchkrow! Use Defog!"

With a glow of it's wings, the pokemon flapped as hard as it could, powerful winds that were specifically meant to get rid of problems like the fog streaking towards it and sailing right through as if the mist was merely a mirage.

Those closest could only gape at what they saw until Brock blurted out, "Defog didn't do a thing."

"No matter which way we try to escape, we always end up where we started," Kai explained to them. "We've tried flying pokemon and everything, but somehow we just end up back here."

Ash narrowed his eyes at the fog. It looked like his instincts were right and there was something off about it.

"We need to study this," Tonio spoke up. "To see exactly what's causing it and if it's dangerous."

"And how long will that take?" Alberto, still as a Lickilicky wearing a golden sash, demanded.

"Uh, well..."

A sudden urge hit Ash, and without a single thought about the potential consequences, he stepped forward and said, "I'll be right back!"

"Ash!" Misty tried to grab his collar but he moved too quickly, Pikachu and Ria bounding after him.

As he ran into it, the fog surrounded him, and he instantly knew it wasn't normal. It was so thick and it just felt wrong. Not like it was alive or anything like that – fog didn't have an aura – but it still wasn't right.

“Stay close!” He called to his pokemon as they ran. With every step he took, Ash felt like he was slowing down, like the fog itself was weighing on him. It was getting hard to breath, and it felt like he was trying to run through water. They kept running until the fog started to thin, but it wasn't the mountains outside of Alamos Town that he saw.

Ash skidded to a stop, staring at his friends and the group of trainers that they were with, pure confusion rushing through him. He turned around to face the fog again. “I know we ran straight.”

“Pikachu,” Pikachu tilted his head with confusion.

“I don't like this stuff,” Ria spoke up.

“Me neither.”

“It's that Darkrai!” Alberto's voice yelled. Ash looked back towards everyone else and saw him addressing the group of trainers that were there. “It's up to one of it's evil tricks! Nothing's going to change until we destroy the nasty demon!”

“Destroy a legendary?” Ash asked as he came back over to them, his brow furrowing. “That's the stupidest thing I ever heard.” He had heard a lot of stupid things, but that was up there with the worst of the worst.

Baron Alberto could have looked menacing as a human, if he tried to give Ash the same hard stare that he was now, but it just looked ridiculous, like a childish pout on Lickilicky's face. “What would you know? You're not only a child but you're just a tourist here. We are the ones that have to live with this monster! Or have you forgotten how it attacked you personally?”

“It didn't!” Ash's fists clenched as he took a step forward. “It was defending itself against Lickilicky and accidentally hit me!” Actually, that might not have been entirely true. Darkrai might have been aiming for him, under the guise that Lickilicky was his target, but Ash doubted that he was aiming to hurt.

“You're confused!”

Meowth was rolling his camera again, and into her microphone, Jessie said, “And Baron Lickilicky is back up to speed on the situation!”

“It's Baron Alberto!” He raged, licking her with his long tongue to shut her up. She let out a small shriek and rubbed her face with disgust. Ash remembered her own Lickitung doing that many times in the past, and was mildly surprised that she wasn't used to it.

“Pokemon Trainers!” Alberto cried out, drawing Ash's attention back to him again. “Lend me your ears! Your strength! Your expertise!” He waved his arms. “We must destroy this loathsome and evil Darkrai!”

“That's wrong and you know it!” Ash yelled at him, and he might have actually tried to hit the man-turned-pokemon if May and Dawn didn't grab a hold of him to yank him back.

“A child's wish for the world to be made of rainbows and sunshine,” Alberto noted with a dramatic sigh. “An illusion. It's a shame really.” He turned away. “Follow me into the fray!”

Ash was more than a bit shocked that all of the trainers were following him, Jessie, James and Meowth tagging along to film it all.

Allegra, Kai and Maury hung back for a moment, whispering to each other and glancing over at Ash. Allegra sighed and looked at Kai, "What do you think?"

"They need us." Ash couldn't help but feel slightly betrayed as the three of them followed the others.

May and Dawn let go of his arms, and he stumbled forward a bit before regaining his footing. He took a deep breath before spinning around and staring at his friends. "I can't believe them!"

"You need to calm down," Misty told him sternly as she came up to his side, leaving no room for argument. Naturally that meant that he felt the need to do just that.

"But they-!"

"Look at your hand," she whispered in a low voice so that only he could hear. She grabbed his wrist, twisting it around more painfully than she meant to.

Ash looked down, more than a bit alarmed to see a familiar, pale blue glow around his clenched fist. Not just that, but from the way she jerked his hand around, if he let go of the growing power, it would hit her. Maybe she was doing that on purpose, an intensive to make him calm down. Was he truly angry enough to let this happen?

Then he was confused. "Why..." It shouldn't have been happening. His aura lashed out when it was uncontrolled, first released around the Tree of Beginning where natural aura flowed through every little rock. This place didn't have that type of power.

Ash looked up at the fog again, not able to truly explain what was going on, but knowing that it was only going to get worse.

He took a few deep breaths to calm himself, watching the glow vanish as he looked up at her almost pleadingly. "Misty...Darkrai...letting them just go is wrong and you know it."

She nodded her head as she held his hands tightly, and Ash knew that it wasn't just a nod to appease him. She truly thought that what those people set off to do was horrible.

"Ash, thank you for trying to stop him," Alice spoke up after a moment of silence, a very downcast expression on her face. "You see, I don't think Darkrai's doing this."

"He's not," Ash shook his head sadly. "Sure, he put the pokemon to sleep, but all of this?" He motioned to the fog. "I know he's a legendary pokemon, but how could he?" At his own mention of the word legendary, he tensed up again. "And who does Alberto think he is? Saying to kill a legendary pokemon! Doesn't he know how much that could mess everything up?!"

Ash knew more than most that the balance between the legendary pokemon could be very, very fragile. A single Moltres being captured was the first piece in a series of events that turned the three legendary birds against each other and Lugia as well, and it started a storm that could have ended the world. If something were to happen to Kyogre, Groudon would claim the oceans as his own, and vice versa could happen as well. If Rayquaza was taken out of the picture, there would be nothing to stop the two from clashing.

He felt like he was on to something, but he didn't quite know what.

"If it's not Darkrai doing this," Dawn spoke up cautiously, "then what is? It has to be him, right?"

"No, not necessarily," Tonio spoke up almost hesitantly. His dark eyes glanced at Alice for a moment before he looked back at them. "You see, when Alice and I were kids, we were playing Godey's garden. Alice – being Alice – climbed up on one of the high ledges and was trying to get me to go up with her -."

"Oh! I remember this!" Alice interrupted. She smiled sheepishly and said, "I kept trying to get you to go up and play with me. I was running along the ledge not even thinking about looking. I know, it was dumb of me." She giggled a bit. "The ledge broke under my feet, and I ended up falling down. I don't really remember much after that, but I know you saved me." She smiled at Tonio warmly.

"That's – not exactly true," he admitted reluctantly. "I wasn't sure if you'd believe me if I told you what really happened."

"What really happened?"

"I was running after you," Tonio explained, "and you had just fainted. That's when I saw something jump up and catch you. I was never really clear about what it was, but I saw you laying on the ground, and a shadow darting away from you. I had my theories based on stories I heard, but after today I'm certain, it was Darkrai who saved you."

"Oh Tonio," Alice muttered to him.

"It's not just that. Godey's diary says that it was your grandmother who first opened up Darkrai's heart. I don't believe Darkrai's evil at all."

Silence fell over the seven of them as they all exchanged confused looks.

"What do you think is causing this then?" May asked curiously.

"She's right. If it's not Darkrai, it has to be something," Dawn agreed.

"And something's stopping everyone from leaving town," Ash reminded them.

"I don't have all the answers. I don't have many at all," Tonio told them with a heavy sigh, as if he let them down. "For now, we just need to hang on and watch out for one another."

"That means no more running into mystery fog," Misty scolded as lightly, and a very small, sheepish grin actually appeared on his face.

"The point is, we really, really need to figure out what's going on," Brock spoke up. "No one else is going to believe us that it's not Darkrai since he's the obvious culprit."

"I'm going to go back to my lab," Tonio told them. "I'll send up a couple Driflbim to try and get different perspectives on Alamos Town. Hopefully, I can find something."

"I'll come with you," Alice said. "Two sets of eyes are better than one, right?"

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Dawn asked them curiously.

"Try to help Darkrai," Alice spoke up after a moment. "Don't put yourselves in danger, but we can't let the others destroy him. We'll try to keep in touch!" Tonio already started walking away, so she hurried after him.

The five of them got into a circle, and May asked, "What now?"

"We're missing something," Misty told them. "If something else is doing this, then that must be why Darkrai's putting pokemon to sleep. But why?"

"Well, it's pretty obvious that something's wrong," Ash shrugged, drawing the attention back to him. It took him a moment to realize that everyone was staring at him, lost in his own little world. He blinked and then said, "What, you think we would have noticed that things were getting really weird if the pokemon didn't start flying around and Baron Asshole wasn't turned into a Lickilicky?"

"Ash!" Misty scolded him, smacking his arm lightly.

"He's got a point though," Brock said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "We wouldn't have noticed it. In fact, the contest was supposed to be starting, so no one would have even bothered trying to get out of Alamos Town. They would have just assumed there was just some bad weather happening."

Silence fell over them once again before May asked the question that they were all thinking. "Do you think that's why Darkrai did that? To show us that something was really wrong?"

"Go away," Ash mumbled.

"That's rude," May bristled, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Huh? Oh, sorry. No I was thinking back to what Darkrai said before. Go away."

"What if he wasn't talking to us?" Dawn caught on excitedly as she rang her hands together. "What if he was talking to whatever did this?"

"We need to find him to stop the other trainers!" Ash was about to run ahead again, but this time Misty actually managed to grab a hold of him. "Come on, Mist! We don't have time to talk."

"And how do you plan on taking on that many pokemon trainers, all with six pokemon each? Hmm?" Ash faltered a bit at that, but Misty didn't let go of his arm. Misty knew him too well. He wasn't a planner, the type to stand around and theorize or talk everything out. He was the type to act, to go with his gut and do what he could at that moment.

"Then we need to try and help him," Misty said. "Otherwise all of those people are going to attack him, and legendary or not, what happens when there are a lot of pokemon attacking him?"

"We need to find them."

...

As it turned out, finding the group looking for Darkrai wasn't the problem in the least. With flashes of fire, torrents of water and combinations of just about everything else colliding midair, the sounds and the smoke rising up into the air was enough to give it all away.

They didn't even get there, meeting most of the trainers half way as they struggled to carry their larger pokemon to the Pokemon Center. Instead of blaming them for the actions, calling them out by saying that they shouldn't have attacked Darkrai, Ash, Brock, Dawn, May and Misty decided to take the high road and help people move their pokemon to safety.

"Ria," Ash spoke to the small pokemon he was cradling in his arms. "I want you to go back into your pokeball."

"But I can help," she said to him sadly.

"Maybe when you're bigger, a little more stronger," Ash muttered to her as he held up her pokeball. "Just not now."

"Pikachu pika chu pika," Pikachu agreed in a soft voice.

Ria looked at the two of them, slumping down slightly before tapping the button on the pokeball and going inside. Ash felt horrible for it, but he wanted to protect her from whatever was going on. If he could convince Pikachu to go into his pokeball, he would do that too. Ash already knew that was a losing battle though.

Ash looked towards May, who was sitting with Blaziken, stroking his feathers as he twitched in pain. Dawn was beside her, cradling Buizel in her arms while Brock rubbed Sudowoodo's head. Ash knew that he had been lucky, coming face to face with Darkrai and getting hit himself, but waking up before anything worse could happen. All of his pokemon were fine as well, so he knew that he was lucky.

It made him feel horrible to feel so relieved.

He felt someone sit beside him, looking over at Misty as she put her hand on top of his. She had been lucky too. All of her pokemon were perfectly fine, and aside from maybe aging a few years because of the stress he put her through, everything was fine.

They were both silent, and the silence made Ash twitch. He wanted to move, to do something, but he wasn't sure what he could do. Darkrai had escaped again, they were all trapped by some unseen force, and no one else would believe them.

"I can smell it burning."

Ash blinked, looking over at Misty. He made a face of confusion, and she smiled at him. "Your brain. You're thinking so hard that I can smell it burning."

"Funny," Ash said with a huff, though a small, genuine smile did appear on his face.

"You want to do something." It wasn't a question, but a statement.

"Yeah."

"But you don't know what."

"...Yeah."

"We will," he was actually a bit surprised by her words, and it must have been obvious. Misty shook his head slightly reaching up and playing with his raven hair. "It's what happens, and I get that now. Complaining about this happening isn't going to help, so I'm going to do what I can instead." She looked towards the others, frowning slightly. "I want to help them too. You're not the only one who jumps when their friends need them." She paused and grinned slightly. "Though I do think more than you do."

"You're hilarious today, you know that," Ash rolled his eyes at her.

"Hey, I got you to stop being mopey," she pointed out. Misty stared at him for a moment before asking, "What do you want to do now? I don't think you put Ria away just to stay here. Whatever you want to do, I'll try to help. Alberto asked what would you know, but when it comes to

legendaries, nobody knows better than you what can happen. And Mew knows you need me to jump into a freezing cold ocean to pull you out, or to use my dopey Psyduck to keep you from falling to your doom. So, what are we doing?"

Ash stared at her. He expected her to tell him to sit down, that someone else could deal with it, that they needed to come up with some complex plan to get them through, but here she was, her sea green eyes shining with complete honesty. He never realized just how much that she understood him.

Without warning, Ash kissed her on the lips, closing his eyes and ignoring Pikachu's mad giggle beside him. He didn't care that, if they looked, anyone in the Pokemon Center would see, and he didn't care about the surprised sound she made before she kissed him back.

It wasn't very long, more just like a slightly extended peck, but that was okay. They broke apart and Misty stared up at him with pink on her cheeks as she smiled at him. They just stared at one another for a moment, but it wasn't shy or awkward. There was just an air of mutual understanding and affection.

"Well, that was cute and all, but what are all of us supposed to do now?" May's mischievous voice startled both of them, and the girl's sapphire eyes looked more than just slightly amused. It was obvious that she seen what had just transpired between them, and from the amusement on Brock and Dawn's faces, so had they.

Oddly enough, Ash didn't feel embarrass like he thought he would.

"We find Darkrai," he blurted out. "We find him and help him instead of hurting him."

"Well, he does know what's happening," Brock agreed. "No one else has a clue about what's going on."

"I might!" The conversation instantly died as Tonio and Alice both rushed in, completely out of breath from the run there. Tonio had his laptop in his hand, one of the few electronic devices that was still working since the Pokemon Center and the Space-Time Towers were the only buildings with emergency generators that were still working.

"You know what's happening?"

"Well, I know who's causing all of this. Sort of." Tonio knelt down so that they could all see, zooming in on the image on the screen. "Look."

They all got up and gathered around him. A shiver shot up Ash's spine as he recognized it. "I saw that in my nightmare!" Everyone's attention turned to him, but his mind was running a mile a minute now and that was never good for him. He had felt something large in the sky, and in retrospect, he remembered thinking about how it reminded him of the creature he saw in his dream. How had he let that thought go?

"God I'm stupid," Ash groaned. "I saw that thing in the nightmare Darkrai gave me and..." He had forgotten until now, he had a separate nightmare before they even got there, one completely unprompted by Darkrai. "Everyone who ever said I was an idiot is right."

Brock narrowed his eyes at the picture and asked, "Is that the best quality you have?"

"No, I can enhance it a little more. The program was running in the background since it was taking a while." Tonio switched programs, and the image that came up was much sharper, clearer.

“What IS that?” May asked with astonishment.

“That looks like...Palkia,” Brock said, sounding a bit uncertain. “Right?”

“Yes,” Tonio said, grim realization coming to him. “It's said that Palkia lives in between dimensions and rules over space. A pokemon that's been called a deity.”

“Deity?” Dawn and Ash both asked, identical looks of confusion on their faces.

“A god,” Alice told them both with a frown.

“It all makes sense now,” Tonio groaned. “When the garden was warped and turned into waste, it was a sign that Palkia was here. Darkrai must have sensed what was about to happen and tried to stop him. It was at the moment the sky lit up that Palkia burst into the city.”

“And Darkrai was the only one who saw,” Misty said sadly.

“So it would seem.”

“When he told us to go away, he was actually speaking to Palkia,” Ash groaned out and put his face in his hands. “He tried to warn me by giving me that nightmare, but I just assumed he was...” Bad? Evil? Ash wasn't sure anymore.

“Why's Palkia doing this?” Dawn asked. “Why is he keeping us here? Why does Darkrai want him to leave?”

“He's hurt,” Ash muttered. “Really hurt, and he's trying to hide.”

“If that's true, what could have hurt it?” May wondered out loud, and they all fell silent.

Ash fidgeted before reaching up and fixing his cap, holding his arm out to Pikachu. The pokemon climbed up on his shoulder, and nodded his head. Both of their faces mirrored the same determination.

“So?” Misty asked him. It was completely out of context, but still, Ash knew what she was talking about.

“If it's hurt, it's probably not moving much.” Ash looked out the window, at the towers he could clearly see. “I'm going to the Space-Time Towers. I'm going to try and stop this.”

Sky

Deities of Space and Time

As they left the Pokemon Center, the last of the lights flickered out. With the clouds growing steadily darker, Alamos Town was plunged into darkness. Luckily, flashlights and torches were always an option, and Brock had a lot of flashlights while Alice had her Chimchar.

The large group ran down the cobble stone streets. It was funny, just earlier that day, they had walked down the very same path, with high hopes for the contest that was due to start later on (needless to say, it had been post phoned), and the fun they planned on having.

“One of these days, I promise you'll be able to visit when nothing weird is going on,” Ash told Misty just before they left.

“Oddly enough, I don't really believe that.”

It was true, he was a magnet for trouble, but it seemed like this attraction to perilous situations doubled when she was around. Maybe something thought that he could take more danger when she was there because she'd help him. It was completely and utterly ridiculous, and now wasn't really the time to think about things that were out of their control.

When they finally reached the square in front of the Space-Time Towers, Darkrai flew overhead, streaking up towards the sky.

“Where's he going?” Dawn asked, her eyes going wide.

“To stop Palkia?” May suggested, sounding unsure as she twisted her hands together with worry.

Darkrai was flying so quickly, that when he finally reached his target, the spot where Palkia was hiding in plain sight, he slammed into a barrier and was tossed to the ground with almost double the force. Dust flew up into the air, and everyone covered their faces.

Darkrai's head on assault wasn't for nothing though. The ripples of power rushed through them all again, though not nearly as violently. Ash looked up at the sky to see where it was coming from, and gaped for a moment. “Look!”

“Palkia!” Misty gasped. Seeing the picture on Tonio's computer was different than seeing the massive legendary pokemon hovering in the sky, even if the towers themselves still dwarfed it.

Ash looked around just in time to see Darkrai rise out of the crater than had been made upon his impact with the ground. He took a step towards the pokemon and yelled, “Wait!”

“Go away!” Darkrai roared angrily, not heeding Ash's words in the least. Generating a massive orb of darkness in his hands, the pokemon threw the darkly glowing sphere at Palkia.

Its barrier absorbed the attack, but something changed in that moment. Palkia started to move, a pink glow appearing around its body as the barrier vanished and its cry echoed through the air.

As if the sound itself had done it, the clouds and fog were blown away, and May let out a startled scream as she took a step back. Dawn grabbed her arm, and the two of them stared in absolute horror. Brock just gaped in shock, while Misty grabbed Ash's hand. He himself was far too stunned at what he was seeing to really believe it.

There was no sky, there were no mountains, there was nothing but swirls of ominous, dark colours

on an inky surface.

“What's going on?” Ash asked, his complete bafflement obvious.

“That is a good question,” Tonio spoke up as he threw a pokeball up in the air. “Go, Drifblim. Go up and get some video for us to analyze while the cameras and my computer are still working.”

“Drif drif blim!” the pokemon quickly flew upwards, and not long after, Tonio's screen lit up with images from above. This wasn't just the sky they were looking at, the entire city was absolutely surrounded on all sides as well as under them, from the looks of it.

“We're in another dimension,” Tonio breathed out in awe.

“Really?” Misty burst out, unable to hold in her temper. She was scared, she was worried, and he was talking about this like it was a good thing. “You know that just because we're surrounded by this? How the hell could you know something like that?”

“Misty!” Ash jerked her away from him and put his hands on her shoulders. “Stop it.” She let out an annoyed huff at him, but decided not to argue.

“How can you be sure?” Brock asked Tonio.

“Palkia is said to be the deity of space, so if anything is going to be altered, it'll be the space around us. Maybe he could have just changed it, but I honestly believe that we're in a separate dimension,” he clarified, eying Misty warily.

“Blaz!”

May shot around, her sapphire eyes growing watery at what she saw. “Blaziken!” She laughed and hugged the tall pokemon.

“Buizel!” Dawn cried out, grasping the water-types hands and jumping excitedly.

“Sudowoodo!” Brock laughed as he jumped up into his arms, stumbling a little bit.

“Everyone's awake,” Alice commented as she watched the real Lickilicky run by them, no doubt looking for Baron Alberto.

“Why?” Ash asked bluntly, staring at them even though he'd yet to take his hands off of Misty's shoulders, still a bit wary that the obviously frustrated and fed up girl might pounce on someone. “Not that I'm complaining, but they felt really stuck in their nightmares.” Realizing what he said, Ash was quick to back-track. “You know, that's what it looked like at least.”

Tonio looked thoughtful for a moment before he looked back at his laptop and the different screens and readings on it. “Palkia transported the town to another dimension, so when Darkrai attacked pokemon and gave them nightmares-.”

“We figured that out,” May interrupted as she stroked Blaziken's feathers. “He might have put them to sleep to show us that something was wrong.”

“Even if he didn't know that would happen, Darkrai at least wanted them to be out of action for a while so he could focus on Palkia,” Brock added. “Ash has a point though. Why are they waking up now?”

“I was getting to that.” For once, Tonio actually sounded annoyed at their interruptions. He was

about to keep talking but was interrupted by a massive bang and shockwave as Palkia landed on the ground.

Dust flew up in the air as Palkia cried out, and Pikachu's fur stood on end as his cheeks sparked. Piplup, Buizel, Sudowoodo and Chimchar looked ready to attack, but Ash stopped them. He dropped his hands from Misty's shoulders and said, "No. Palkia's not...bad...it's hurt."

"How do you know that?" Dawn asked him, sounding genuinely surprised, though she still scooped Piplup into her arms and held Buizel to her side so that they wouldn't attack.

Ash hesitated, because there was no real reason that he'd know Palkia would be hurt without his aura, and he really wanted to keep that away from everyone as much as he could. His mind wheeled over different excuses, but he came up with nothing.

"It's arm," Misty blurted out, pointing a thin finger towards the legendary pokemon. "Look at the pearl on it's arm. It's cracked."

Along with everyone else, Ash looked towards Palkia and relief rushed through him. Misty was right, the injury was obvious. He looked at her, face showing pure gratitude. She shook her head and muttered, "We're going to talk about this later, okay?"

He had no idea what there was to talk about, but Ash just nodded his head. Now was not the time to butt heads with anyone.

Without any warning – no calling of an attack or even letting them know that he was there – Darkrai attacked Palkia again, a powerful blast of darkness slamming into the pokemon and once again throwing dust into the air.

They covered their faces and coughed, but with a loud cry, Palkia forced all of the dust away and took to the sky, a dark pink glow around its body as it faced Darkrai. Palkia blocked the blue electricity, and was clearly bed up, tearing after Darkrai with a vicious cry. The two legendary pokemon shot into the air towards the Space-Time Towers, Darkrai hurling attacks that Palkia blocked with ease.

"Darkrai's a legendary, but he'd have nothing on Palkia," Brock said, worry etched through his voice because there was little they could do to stop this.

"What do we do?" Dawn asked, grasping her hands against one another with a tone of urgency. She didn't understand why no one else was trying to do anything to stop this, especially as Palkia started fighting back.

"Not get in the middle of two legendaries, that's what," May told her. In her travels with Ash, she too came face to face with many legendary pokemon, even befriending one more as a child than anything else. The brief thought of Manaphy made her heart ache, but there was no time to think about that. She knew how dangerous this type of confrontation could become.

Ash's eyes shot towards the sky with alarm, something that Dawn, Tonio and Alice were oblivious too. He was aware of Misty, Brock, May and Pikachu's worried looks, but now wasn't the time to think of that. Something else was coming, and it wasn't hurt. No, it was furious.

Meteors rained down from the sky, slamming into Palkia, Darkrai and the town below. Screams could be heard from the people as buildings, roads, everything around them was destroyed.

Debris flew through the air, and they needed to retreat back farther. The Space-Time Towers proved to be good at blocking any stone, splinters and glass that hurled through the air before the

barrage ended.

“What was that?” Dawn gasped out, holding onto Piplup with shaking arms as they stayed at the edge of the towers.

“Time,” Ash said suddenly, and everyone looked at him oddly. “You said Palkia was the deity that ruled over space, right? Well, I’m thinking that one rules over time.” He pointed as another massive creature, this one surrounded by blue light appeared.

“Dialga,” Brock breathed out in awe. “You’re right, he does rule over time.”

Dialga let out an angry cry as it attacked Palkia, tackling and slamming it to the ground. Dust flew in the air, but this time it was accompanied by pale purple sparks as the houses around them started to vanish.

“Why are they fighting?” May cried out as Palkia flew into the air again, heading back in their direction just as Dialga hit it with a powerful Hyper Beam. Palkia slammed into the ground, ripping the cobblestone as it skidded to a stop.

Dialga landed in front of them, and Ash had never felt so much anger radiating from a single pokemon in his life – and he had come across a lot of very angry ones before.

The Deity of Time let out a roar that encompassed Alamos Town, blue waves of energy covering everything. Tonio’s laptop started glitching before it shut off, and up above them, the clock on the Time Tower started spinning rapidly. The attack was so powerful, that even though they tried to keep their footing, everyone was hurled back.

Alice screamed as she slammed into Tonio and the two of them hit the ground, grunting as they slammed into the trees.

Ash, Misty, Dawn, May and Brock, along with their pokemon, ended up in massive pile of tangled limbs, the result of trying to hold up one another.

“Pikapi?” Pikachu cried out as he pushed himself up, looking around for his trainer.

“Under you.”

Pikachu looked down and saw that he was standing on the back of Ash’s head. He let out a small squeak and jumped off of the pile, rubbing the back of his head as Ash looked at him.

Being at the very edge of the pile, Ash managed to squirm his way out. He was lucky, he wasn’t hurt beyond a couple small scrapes, scratches and bruises.

Pikachu helped pull Piplup out of the pile before they both tried to help get Buizel out from under Dawn’s legs.

May attempted to stand up to get off of everyone else, but she screamed and fell to the ground, holding on to her ankle. Her Blaziken was at her side almost instantly, kneeling down and staring at her, his worry obvious.

Brock got up at her scream and hurried to her other side. He carefully pulled her sock down to look at her ankle, grimacing a bit as he did. He himself had a couple of scratches from where he hit the ground, but like Ash, it was nothing bad. He pressed on a few spots around her ankle, causing May to whimper and whine a little bit.

Dawn groaned loudly, and Ash's attention instantly shot to the young girl. Misty was kneeling beside the blue-haired girl with a hand on her shoulder, speaking so quietly that Ash couldn't hear her. Dawn was holding her head in her hands, and slowly nodded her head to whatever it was that Misty asked her. She slowly looked up, blinking in an almost dazed way.

"Are you okay?" Ash asked Dawn as he knelt in front of her. Whatever was happening with Palkia and Dialga could wait for just a moment.

"I'm fine. I hit my head, just here." She pointed to the corner where a large bruise was already starting to spread out. "I landed half on Misty though, so it's not bad."

"I don't think she has a concussion," Misty told him. "I think it's just going to hurt and leaving a nasty bruise."

"I'm fine," Dawn assured him, a little more strongly as she pushed herself to her feet, wavering just slightly. Ash grabbed her arm to keep her up straight, but she moved away when she managed to get her footing.

Misty stood beside him, staring at the younger girl with worry. "You okay?" He asked her.

Her sea green eyes turned to him and she was silent for a moment before she nodded.

Oddly enough, Ash wasn't quite sure that he believed her. He didn't get the chance to protest though as Palkia's distinctive cry rang through the air.

The pokemon got up, anger rolling off of it as it faced Dialga, attacking with a viciousness that it hadn't bothered with when it came to Darkrai. The attack scattered, tearing up the ground and putting a massive hole between their group and Alice and Tonio.

That was just the beginning. The two legendary pokemon took to the air, powerful beams and balls of light and energy streaking across the sky at one another in a deadly barrage. Any time the attacks rebounded and slammed into a house, the house would start to vanish in a shower of purple sparks.

One of Palkia's stray attacks flew towards the Space-Time Towers but a streak of darkness beat it there. Darkrai cried out in pain as he took the attack instead, glaring up at deities hatefully.

"Two entities that never should have met!" Tonio yelled out from the opposite side of the massive crater. He looked around desperately for a way across, but he couldn't find any. "Go to my lab and look at the diary!" His words were almost lost amidst the chaos.

"Blaz!" Blaziken stood up, moving in front of May and Brock and batting away some of the debris that flew towards them.

"You three go!" Brock yelled out to them. "I'll stay with May!"

Ash hesitated, only bad things ever came from splitting up, but they really had no choice in the matter. May couldn't walk and she certainly couldn't stay alone with two powerful pokemon fighting and a third hovering somewhere nearby. He couldn't just leave them there though.

He needed to get Palkia and Dialga to calm down. His bright brown eyes looked at Dawn for a moment before he decided that it didn't matter if another person knew his secret or not. He had an ability that might help and he was being selfish with it in a time when he really shouldn't have been.

Ash closed his eyes, and the world lit up in a way that very few others could see. He could see the outlines of the trees and buildings and the piles of rocks and so much more. The aura of his friends were bright behind him, but he was focusing on the almost blinding outlines of Palkia and Dialga.

It was strange, but he could see his own aura reaching out to their own, trying to connect with them. He just wanted to make them see that it was okay, that they didn't need to fight.

When his aura finally came into contact with them, Ash's knees buckled under him. He fell to the ground, holding his head in his hands as images from both of their perspectives rushed through his mind, coupled with thoughts and feelings of pure rage and betrayal.

"Ash!" He could hear a faint scream of his name from all of his friends, and someone's hands were on his shoulders. The images assaulted his mind for a little while longer before he managed to pull away from them.

His bright brown eyes snapped open and he reeled back when he saw Dawn kneeling much too close to him for his taste, Misty just behind her with an even more worried expression if that was at all possible.

"What just happened?" Dawn asked him, clearly frightened by what had just happened.

"They normally stay in their own dimensions but something happened that brought them together," Ash shook his head. "They thought the other was trying to take over their territory and fought. Then Palkia came here to hide and heal because Dialga was winning."

"How...do you know that?" The younger girl wondered, her eyes going wide.

Ash shook his head and pushed himself to his feet. He looked at his friends and said, "It doesn't matter because they're not going to stop fighting. We have to find a way to make them."

"Go to the lab," May urged them from where she sat on the ground. "Tonio seemed sure that there was an answer there! Don't worry about us, we'll be okay!"

"She's right," Brock agreed. "Our pokemon will help us. Just go before this gets worse!"

The cries of the legendary pokemon echoed through the sky, and Ash knew that they were right. They had wasted enough time with theorizing what happened and how to fix things.

"Let's go."

...

Brock watched the three of them run with Pikachu, Piplup and Buizel close behind. Blaziken and Sudowoodo stood in front of him and May, blocking anything that flew into their direction.

"We should find Alice and Tonio," May said as she tried to push herself up, grimacing a bit.

"You need to stay down."

"No!" May smacked her hand on the torn, cobblestone ground and glared at him intensely. "No, I won't just be a burden to anyone. Help me walk, but we're going to do something!"

There was a sheer stubbornness across her face and Brock knew that she'd be sooner to drag herself away than just sit around. He nodded his head, and stood to help her up, but stumbled instead as a stray attack from Palkia rushed by them.

“New plan. We need to move somewhere else,” Brock said as he knelt down in front of her, his back facing her. “Sudowoodo, Blaziken, help me get May on my back.” He glanced over his shoulder at her. “You can be miss stubborn after we're away from this.”

May was quick to wrap her arms around his neck as he hitched her up onto his back and stood up. She looked around from her vantage point and said, “If we go in the trees we might be able to get around that crater they made.”

“That's an idea,” he agreed, glad that the girl was fairly light. It wasn't the first time that he had toted one of his friends around on his back when things got rough, but he couldn't remember the last time it happened with two raging deities fighting nearby.

“I hope they find something in Tonio's lab,” May muttered, more to herself than to him.

“You and me both,” Brock agreed.

...

Despite the battle raging outside, the only thing that Ash, Misty or Dawn noticed when they got inside of the Space-Time Towers was a slight tremor in the ground that none of them paid any attention to.

Ash led the way, running as quickly as he possible could, tripping down several steps and colliding into the stone wall. He groaned in annoyance but pushed himself away from the wall, running to the door that led to Tonio's office.

“It's stuck on something,” Ash grunted out as he tried to push his weight against the door. It was budging, but there was something pressed against the bottom that was making it very difficult to move.

Misty moved to one side of him, Dawn to the other, and even the three pokemon that were still outside of their pokeballs came to help. All six of them started to push the door that opened slowly before flinging open, and all of them fell onto the pile of books that had been blocking the door.

“The tremours from the fighting must have knocked them all down,” Misty noted as she pushed herself up, trying to hide a wince as she visibly favoured one arm.

Ash was going to question her on it, but she was okay in general and they really needed to stay on task, even he knew that. He looked around the room, stepping over the piles of books and heading towards where all the blank monitors were.

“How are we going to find the diary?” Dawn asked, her blue eyes looking around helplessly.

Ash never got the chance to answer, stumbling again as a powerful shockwave ripped through the room. He looked back at the two girls and then the pokemon. “Great.”

“Look for a handwritten book,” Misty urged them. “Yellowed paper because it's really old.” She looked towards the pokemon. “Try to look in the small spots we can't get into.”

Piplup and Buizel looked a little uncertain at this still rather unfamiliar trainer's command, looking to Dawn instead. Seeing that she was already digging through the piles of papers, and that Pikachu was helping in the search, the two pokemon quickly started looking around.

“Come on,” Ash mumbled under his breath as he tossed book after book aside, another shockwave shaking the walls. “Come on.”

“Oh!” Ash and Misty both looked around at Dawn's exclamation. She looked at them guiltily and said, “Sorry. I just found the picture of Alice's grandmother. She must have dropped it down here earlier.”

Ash shook his head with frustration and kept looking, digging through everything that he could get his hands on. A lot of the books were old, and he couldn't understand any of them. It didn't matter though, because none of them looked like what Misty described.

He could feel himself becoming more desperate and annoyed with each passing moment. His body was so tense that when Misty let out a yell of triumph, he actually jumped.

“I found it,” the redhead exclaimed, flipping through the pages to the ones that were bookmarked with a dog-ear fold, figuring that it was beset to start there. Misty wasn't exactly a speed reader, and the fancy, almost calligraphic writing made it a little more difficult to read.

“There's an entry here about Alice's grandmother, and how she met Darkrai. He was injured and she helped him, not afraid of him at all. Godey found her playing a song on a leaf whistle that calmed all of the pokemon. And Darkrai, whom everyone else had feared, opened his heart to Alicia, and Darkrai began to live in the garden.”

“But that doesn't help us now,” Ash scowled at her, shrinking back a bit at her glare. “Sorry, continue.”

Misty flipped to the next page that was marked off. “This is the line Tonio said as we were separated! Two entities that never should have met cross paths in the space-time rift. This ill-fated meeting has brought fourth their unbridled wrath, enveloping the city. As a result, all is collapsing. What could be the true meaning of this horrible nightmare?” Misty looked up at the two of them. “The two entities are Palkia and Dialga. And the city's pretty enveloped.”

“Did you see the way the buildings were starting to vanish?” Dawn asked nervously, fiddling with a strand of her long, blue hair. “Like they were sparking and disappearing.”

“So Godey had a nightmare,” Misty reasoned, “of this, a hundred years before it happened.”

“How's that possible?”

Ash stayed silently as the two girls spoke back and fourth. He knew it was entirely too possible to have dreams of the future, he himself had been given a warning that something horrible was going to happen, but he had ignored it. Forgot it.

“Does it say anything else?” he finally asked. That didn't really tell them much.

“The next page marked off as blue prints for the Space-Time Tower.” Misty turned the book so that they could both see. It wasn't necessarily the architectural blueprints, but rather the technical ones for the musical aspect of it.

Dawn leaned in closer to the book, dark blue eyes scanning the writing that was on the page to the right of it. “It turns out that the nightmare told me just what I needed to do,” she read aloud. “For the future, I needed to leave Oracion for the world.” She stood up straight, brow furrowing.

“What's Oracion?”

Ash, Misty and even the pokemon all exchanged worried looks, because none of them had the slightest clue what Oracion could be.

...

Brock saw the explosion before he heard or felt it. A blast of pure white light lit up the viciously dark area, stunning him enough to stumble while his eyes desperately tried to readjust to the new lighting. That was when the wind of the shockwave hit him.

With May still on his back, he stumbled to the ground.

Brock fell to the ground as a shockwave hit them. He grunted in pain from the added weight of May on his back, hearing her cry out in pain as she rolled off him, jerking her injured leg. It was nearly impossible to move with the winds whipping at them, but he still got up and pulled the young girl close to him so that he was protecting her.

Sudowoodo and Blaziken did the same, leaning over both of them.

“What's happening?” May asked as she looked past the pokemon.

Brock turned to follow her gaze, his eyes adjusted, watching as purple sparks started flying off of a roof that vanished with ever flicker of light that left it. “What the hell?”

The buildings didn't stop dissolving once the shock waved passed, in fact, from Brock's point of view, it got worse.

“Look at that!” May cried out, pointing in another direction. With dread, Brock turned around to see what he feared, the sky was absolutely filled with sparks.

“The whole town's falling apart,” he mumbled before pushing himself up. “Sudowoodo, are you alright?”

“Wood!”

Brock nodded and looked at Blaziken. “Do you think you can carry May? We need to run fast and you're much stronger than me.”

“Blaze!” Blaziken easily reached down and picked up his injured trainer.

“Right, now we need to-.” Brock was cut off as Dialga and Palkia appeared overhead, their attacks slamming into one another again.

“Stop it!” A familiar, female voice screamed. “Stop fighting right now!” Alice ran from the trees, Tonio trying to grab her arm to pull her back, but she was much faster than him. She ran towards a clearing, pleading desperately with the two legendary pokemon to stop their attack.

Neither heeded her cries. Dialga tackled Palkia with so much force that both of them spiralled to the ground, slamming into it right where Alice was standing.

Sky

Oracion

Brock was sure that May's scream of terror must have echoed around all that remained of Alamos Town. Dust settled in the air, slowly fading away to reveal Alice kneeling on the ground, protecting her head with her hands. Dialga and Palkia hung in the air, suspended for a moment by a powerful shield created by Darkrai

The dark-type hovered in front of Alice silently before launching a whirlwind of darkness at the other pokemon, tossing them high up into the air. Darkrai flew after them, and the fight between two legendary pokemon turned into a battle between three. Or so it seemed at first.

"They're ganging up on him!" Brock exclaimed, looking around towards where Alice was. His face faulted a bit when he saw Tonio help her up.

"Now's not the time for heartbreak, Brock," May insisted, and he realized that she was absolutely right. He turned his attention to the sky as Darkrai launched the powerful, dark orbs that forced Ash and all of the other pokemon into nightmares earlier, and found himself hoping that they'd actually make their target.

They didn't though, bouncing harmlessly off of blue and pink shields. Darkrai was a legendary pokemon, but Dialga and Palkia were said to be deities, and it was easy to see that they were much more powerful, especially when their powers were combined.

Setting aside their strife for just a moment, Dialga and Palkia launched their attacks towards Darkrai, who was hovering in front of the Space-Time Towers. Even from where they were, they could hear Darkrai's cry of pain as everything but a single pink orb of light hit him, that spare orb hitting Alice's hot-air balloon that rested on the towers instead.

Darkrai fell from the explosion in the sky, streaking down and vanishing into the trees not far from where they were. Alice cried out in horror, running towards where he fell.

"Brock," May called out from where Blaziken was carrying her. "We have to go with them."

He looked up towards Palkia and Dialga, who broke their temporary truce and once again attacked each other, so close to the Space-Time Towers that he couldn't help but worry about his three friends that were inside. Brock knew that May was right though. They had to be useful where they were, and Darkrai might have some answers as to what was happening to the town.

"Let's go."

...

May watched with sad, sapphire eyes as Alice rushed to Darkrai's side. The pokemon was wounded badly, that much was terribly obvious. She couldn't help but feel sad as she watched the legendary pokemon cringe away from Alice's touch at first, before his visibly blue eye stared at her.

"A...li...ca?"

Alice shook her head as she knelt in front of him, smiling slightly. "No. She was my grandmother. My name's Alice."

"Al...ice?"

“Yes.” She touched his hand. “I’m so sorry. You were just trying to protect the town and we thought you were causing trouble. I’m sorry no one understood.”

Darkrai silently stared at her before looking around from Tonio, to Brock, to May, and back. May watched him move a bit before he mumbled, “That boy.”

“That boy? You mean Ash?” Brock spoke slowly at first before the revelation hit him.

“The – one that,” Darkrai cringed in pain, “can see clearly.”

May blinked with surprise at the description. The one that could see clearly? What did that mean? She squinted her eyes with confusion before she remembered Ash's description of Aura when she asked him once. He said that he could see things even when his eyes were closed, that he just knew where things were and what they were feeling, and that it was like he could see everything so much clearer than before.

“You tried to warn him,” May said suddenly, drawing everyone's attention to her. She motioned for Blaziken to put her down, and her pokemon complied, though he stayed close so she could lean on him and take the pressure off of her injured leg. “You tried to show him what was happening, didn't you? He mentioned a nightmare. I'm sure if he was here he'd tell you how sorry he is for not realizing it earlier. I'm sorry too.”

Darkrai stared at her intently, before he faded into the shadows on the ground. They all stared at the spot that he had vanished from sadly, only getting distracted by an explosion in the sky.

Darkrai streaked up from the trees, heading towards the feuding pokemon again.

“Why's he doing this?” Alice asked, and May didn't have to look around to know that there were tears in his eyes.

Tonio watched all of the proceedings with a heavy silence, his dark eyes observing everything. Though he didn't have his laptop anymore, he could still piece together what was happening.

“This way.” Brock, May and Alice turned to face him as he motioned for them to follow. Alice didn't hesitate for a moment, running after him as Brock looped an arm around May to help her limp in that direction.

“I'm sorry,” she said as they followed the older two, feeling more like a burden than she ever had before.

“This isn't your fault.” He assured her.

Alamos Town was built on a massively sloping hill, something that wasn't quite as obvious when just milling around the streets. The part of the garden that they were in had a lookout that made it obvious, since they could see much of the town from there. It gave them the perfect view to watch as the houses just faded away into a sea of purple sparks.

“What's happening?” Alice breathed out.

“This started in small segments when Palkia and Dialga's attacks started to collide,” Tonio said thoughtfully as he eyed the scene with a critical eye. The perimeter of the town started to vanish rapidly at that blast of light when those really powerful attacks collided. Space and time attacks, probably.”

“So, what?” May asked, her eyes going wide. “Is everything getting sent to a different time? Or

space? Or something like that?"

"It might be. If I had my computer and my simulations, I might be able to give you a more accurate answer," he admitted. "Best guess though, would be yes, something like that is probably happening. Or space is simply dismantling before us."

"Is there any way we can stop it?" Brock wondered out loud.

Tonio hesitated, his dark eyes looking around uncertainly before he sighed. "That's what I was trying to tell you guys earlier. Something I read in Godey's diary. He said his nightmare would tell him what to do and that he left Oracion for the world."

"What's Oracion?" Brock and May chorused together.

"I wish I knew." Tonio looked out at the destruction before them, watching as Dialga and Palkia fought viciously. "Because we're running out of time to find out."

...

Oracion was the answer to all of their problems, Ash, Misty and Dawn all knew that. The problem was that none of them had a clue who or what Oracion could be. They were all still down in Tonio's lab, scouring through everything that they possible could to find some answers.

They did stumble upon Tonio's notes, where he theorized that Oracion was an answer to the nightmare Godey had, though he obviously didn't know what any of that meant at the time.

Misty tapped her fingers on the floor, fidgeting a bit as her eyes scanned the room for what felt like the hundredth time. The random taps slowly turned into a rhythm that sounded very familiar, but Ash couldn't quite place it. Honestly, it was starting to drive him insane.

"Would you stop?" He blurted out, looking over his shoulder at her. "You're driving me crazy!"

"Well sorry," Misty snapped back, glaring at him heatedly. "I forgot that you need complete silence to comprehend even easy thoughts!"

"Says the one who's helping by tapping!"

"Well you-!"

Dawn blocked both of them out. This was the third argument to erupt between the two, and she knew that it was just from the stress of the situation. Normally, she would have yelled and pushed them apart, but she was too focused on her search.

Oracion. Something about that word sounded so familiar to her, but she couldn't quite place it. She looked down at the picture of Alice's grandmother, Alicia. "I wonder if you would have known what to do." She lightly tapped the picture against the ground, vaguely recognizing it as the same tune that Alice played on the leaf whistle.

She gasped loudly as she sat up straight, startling Piplup enough to make him jump onto Pikachu, knocking the electric-type to the floor. Ash and Misty's fighting stopped, and they both looked at her with wide eyes.

"Oracion," she said, turning the picture over to see the music that Alice pointed out earlier. "It's right here. Oracion is a song!"

“A song?” Ash repeated, taking the picture from her and staring at the back of it. His eyes went wide when he realized that she was right. “But how does a song...” He trailed off, looking up at the ceiling. “The towers are the world's largest instrument.”

“Do you remember the way the pokemon all calmed down when Alice played it?” Misty asked excited. “What if that's what it's supposed to do. It stops their fighting!”

“That would explain why Darkrai was protecting the towers so much,” Dawn added.

Ash slowly nodded his head and said, “Look for it around here. If not, there were lots upstairs too.”

“There are?” Misty asked with confusion, not recalling where he would have seen them before.

“That big picture-thing on the wall. They were in that,” Ash explained as he started looking through the shelves. “Didn't really think to point it out when I noticed them because I wanted to get up stairs to see how it all worked.”

They dug through the discs in Tonio's office, every single one of them labelled with a name, though not a single one of them read 'Oracion'. There was really no time for discussion or debate on what to do next. Pikachu jumped up onto Ash's head, while Dawn picked up Piplup and returned Buizel to his pokeball, and then the three of them hurried back up the stairs.

The main entrance hall of the tower was eerily quiet, despite the fierce battle that was happening outside. It was beyond strange how they felt the tremors when they were downstairs, yet on ground level everything was so quiet that they could hear their footsteps echoing around the room.

“There's so many of them,” Dawn gasped as Ash led them to the carved mural on the wall. There were discs all over the place, worked into the design so that they were barely noticeable.

“But how do we know which one's which?” Misty wondered out loud, glancing at Ash, who just shrugged. He wished his aura could have been useful at that moment, but it wasn't going to help at all. They were all the same, none of them radiating any special power or anything like that. The power to stop the fighting had to be in the song itself.

Ash looked from disc to disc, but there were no names or any indication of which one they were, the unique patterns on the top of the discs aside. He couldn't help but another time he was looking desperately for an object so that a song could help calm fighting legendaries, and he couldn't help but wonder why it was always him. Maybe his aura attracted them to him, or because he had aura he was unconsciously attracted to them, he didn't know.

“There's no way of knowing which one's which,” Misty answered her own question with frustration, kicking at the edge of the mural. “None of them say anything. Maybe if Alice or Tonio were here, they'd know.”

“I get the feeling we don't have time to go and find them,” Ash admitted as he glanced over at her. “I don't know why, but I just know we're running out of time.”

Dawn frowned as he stared up at the structure, staring at the carving of the girl sitting on the tree, playing a leaf whistle. She took out the picture that she had found earlier, the one Alice left behind. Oracion had to be the song that Alice was playing earlier, the one that calmed all of the pokmon. She flipped the picture over to look at the music written on the back, but froze when she did.

Maybe it was because she was a coordinator, but Dawn had a good eye for detail, and the symbol that was drawn on the back of the picture was very familiar. She looked up at the structure before

her, taking a step back and comparing the symbol to the intricate metal work before them. She gasped loudly when she realized that the one in the center was identical.

“It's on that one!” She cried out, rushing towards it and looking at the individual discs. She showed Ash and Misty the back of the picture as they joined her. “See if you can find one with that on it!”

They scanned all of them carefully, until Misty jumped slightly as if that would help her reach the one that she was looking at. “There!” At the very top of the circle was one with the exact same symbol, almost like a twisted, intricate leaf. She took one of her pokeballs off of her belt, tossing it high into the air.

Dawn took a step back as Gyarados appeared, letting out a fierce roar as it looked around, no doubt searching for an opponent. When he only saw the relaxed Pikachu and Piplup, he looked at Misty with an annoyed expression.

“Sorry, but I need your help with something else,” Misty replied sheepishly, pointing up at the disc. “Can you get me up there to get that? It's really important.”

Ash almost started laughing, because while he still looked the same, he could feel how scandalized Gyarados was for being used for something like that. If the situation wouldn't have been more serious, he probably would have.

Scandalized or not at being used as a step-ladder, Gyarados leaned down so that his trainer could climb atop his large head, moving up so that she could grab the disc, and returning her to the ground. Misty patted him and said, “You could take on the legendaries outside anyday, but we have something more important to do right now. We'll have a good battle later.”

Gyarados nodded as he vanished back into red light, disappearing into her pokeball again. Misty looked at the disc in her hand, holding it up to Ash and Dawn. Dawn put the picture up beside it so they could compare the two symbols, and she nodded her head. “Definitely the right one.”

“Let's get going then,” Ash said, leaving no room for argument. The two girls nodded, and the three of them raced towards the stairs.

...

Brock couldn't sit around and just watch the world fall apart around him. There were so many people and pokemon that were in danger, and it went against everything he believed in not to help. May assured him that she'd be alright on his own, and he left, heading towards a large crowd that he spotted.

Nurse Joy and her Chansey were trying to corral the people and pokemon, trying to get them to go deeper into the town, away from the disappearing edge. The frightened people looked around ready to start trying to push and shove their way towards safety, but that would just cause more injuries and panic.

He hurried forward, calling out, “Nurse Joy!” She looked around at him warily, but that turned to surprise as he asked, “Is there anything I can help you with?”

She eyed him for a moment before nodding her head. “We're going into the center of the park. If you and your pokemon could go ahead to the end of this path and keep them going straight – there's only one spot with a fork in the road – I'd really appreciate it.”

“You got it! Let's go, Sudowoodo!”

“Wood!” He and his pokemon ran as quickly as they could to the spot that Nurse Joy signified, noticing that a few people were wandering off in different directions. “Nurse Joy wants everyone to stay together! Keep on the center path!” His loud voice startled a few people, though they seemed very willing to listen to him. No doubt, everyone was terrified.

It made him wonder where Baron Alberto was. All of the dreams ended, so it made sense to Brock that he would have turned back into normal. He was supposed to be a leader of sorts, but he was nowhere in sight.

Brock decided not to focus on that. Tossing his pokeballs into the air, he got his pokemon to stand and block the paths that the herding people weren't supposed to go down.

He looked up as Dialga slammed into the ground, Palkia flying above him, as if waiting to see if there was a winner of their cataclysmic duel yet. An angry cry and balls of fire streaking up from where the deity of time had fallen. Attacks flew into the sky, no doubt from the trained pokemon that were getting tired of the fighting and destruction. They collided with the fireballs, stopping them from doing any damage, though one was simply redirected.

Croagunk jumped into the air, all but catching the fireball. He held it, stopping it from hitting any of the fleeing people and pokemon, until it fizzled out.

“Wow,” Brock breathed out in awe at the display of power that his own pokemon had. “Good job Croagunk!”

The pokemon lifted his head into the air, looking quite proud.

Nurse Joy came running to them as the stream of people started to die down. “There are a few more trainers back on the bridge telling people to come this way, but the evacuation is nearly finished. I'm going to go into the garden to make sure there are not injuries.”

“Alright, I'll handle things here,” he told her seriously.

She flashed him a genuine smile. “Thank you, Brock. Maybe if this turns out for the better, I will owe you a date.” She hurried off after the people, her Chansey rushing after her.

Brock's mouth fell open with surprise, his cheeks turning pink. He was completely flabbergasted, not sure what to make of that at all.

Another explosion rocked the sky, and he was snapped out of his shock. He looked up towards the towers, worry crossing his face. “Come on guys, you have to get out of there okay, even if it's just to hear about this.” He almost wished that he could project that thought to them, but he wasn't psychic, so that wasn't possible. He had no idea what was going on in there, but he had a feeling that it was the answer to all of their problems.

...

May covered her face as dust flew into the air when Dialga fell to the ground. She peaked up carefully at first, just in time to see the fireballs streak towards the bridge and other pokemon start to fight back.

She looked around as Tonio let out a cry of triumph. He was kneeling on the ground with laptop in hand, an Elekid that she didn't know he had at his side. “I finally got a charge going, so now we can really see what's going on! Drifblim!” The pokemon nodded and floated up into the air to get readings, and May hoped that he got something, so that they'd have a definite answer as to why all of this was really happening.

“Darkrai.” May glanced over at Alice next. The blond woman was scanning the dark skies with worried eyes, but there was no sight of the third legendary pokemon at all.

“I’m sure he’s okay,” May assured her, though she was beginning to feel a bit doubtful about it. How many times could the pokemon take attacks from two other legendaries before he really started to feel it?

Alice nodded her head, twisting her hands together. She started to hum a bit to herself, the same soothing song that all of the pokemon seemed to love earlier. May watched Blaziken, Elekid and Chimchar relax a little more, and was a bit amazed that a song could hold such soothing powers.

“Oracion!” Alice cried out suddenly, startling both her and Tonio.

“What about it?” May asked, putting a hand over her rapidly beating heart.

“I knew it sounded familiar! It was the name of the song on the back of my photograph!” Alice turned to face her with wide eyes. “Oracion is a song and I bet anything that it’s inside of the Space-Time Towers!”

...

“I forgot how many stairs this tower had!” Dawn puffed out as they ran up the spiralling staircase.

“Don’t worry, we’re almost there,” Ash assured her, a couple steps ahead.

“That’s a lie and you know it,” she snapped back, clearly more exhausted than actually angry.

“We’re almost to the deck with the hot air balloon,” Misty pointed out.

Ash took a deep breath, knowing she was right, but also realizing that there was no way that could help them. None of them had a fire pokemon on them to work the balloon, so without Alice it was completely useless. He really needed to start keeping Charizard with him wherever he went. Ash realized that a fire-breathing, dragon-looking creature that he could actually fly on would have made so many of these adventures so much easier.

They could try to think of something though. Maybe he could get Staravia to try and use gust to get them up or something. The smell of smoke broke him out of that happy thought, and dread hit him. Running the last few steps until they were at the platform, Ash let out a groan to see the hot air balloon completely in flames. Dawn and Misty got up to where he was a moment later, Dawn slumping to the ground and Misty sighing.

He shifted the disc in his arms. While it really didn’t weigh all that much, it was a bit awkward and carrying it up the stairs made it feel so much heavier than it actually was.

“What do we do now?” Dawn asked, looking up the stairs. She wasn’t sure if she could actually make it up there. “How’d you get up the stairs earlier?”

He thought about that. Ash could use his aura again like he had earlier, but he almost threw himself out of the steel structure a couple of times. There’s no way he had enough control over that to get all three of them up. What they needed was a flying -type, and one that could actually carry them up. It didn’t have to be a flying-type, he decided, it just had to be big enough to help the three of them out.

Ash’s eyes snapped to Misty. “Gyarados!”

“What?” Her brow furrowed at him, clearly thinking that he had lost his mind. “Gyarados can't fly us up there, even if it's classified as part flying-type.”

“No, but it can hover for periods of time when they're stretched out, right?” he asked her, not quite sure if that was actually true or not. “He's long, he can hover and spiral himself around to get us up faster. Even if it's only part of the way!”

“Pika pikachu pikapi,” Pikachu said clearly.

“Doesn't matter if he's not impressed by it or not, we have to get up there.”

Misty looked at the width of the stairs. She bit her lip before narrowing her eyes and nodding her head. “Alright. Might be a tight fit, but we'll give it a shot. Lets go, Gyarados!”

Once again, Gyarados did not seem impressed that there was no battle before him, though he did turn his head towards the warring legendary pokemon in the sky. Misty patted his side and said, “No, we don't want them to notice us. We need your help to get up the tower.”

If Gyarados could talk, Ash was sure it'd be saying something along the lines of 'give me a break'. Still, he lowered his head once Misty explained the plan, and they were on their way up the tower. It wasn't particularly fast, Gyarados had to be careful in the narrow stairs, but at least it gave them the chance to rest their aching legs.

“Look at it,” Dawn breathed out, her big blue eyes scanning the town as they steadily moved up the tower. They could see the people in the gardens, but the rest of the town was completely empty as it slowly fell apart, purple flecks flying off into the darkness around them. “What do you suppose happens if we disappear too?”

“Lets not think about it,” Misty replied with a bit of a shudder, and Ash could understand why. There was absolutely no way to know what would happen, but falling to pieces in any situation didn't sound appealing at all.

As they reached the more intricate looming ledges and sweeping slopes that decorated the top of the individual Space and Time Towers, they were so high up now that they could see the entire town. What had seemed like such a quaint, enchanting place was now in ruins, slowly vanishing from the outside in, and even the buildings that hadn't begun to disappear were in ruins from the fighting pokemon.

The wind whipped their faces as Palkia and Dialga streaked by, glowing orbs and streams of energy flying in every direction, some colliding with each other, some hitting the intended targets, and others slamming into the town below.

Darkrai appeared again, flying up the side of the tower and staring at them for a brief moment, his eyes falling on the disc in Ash's hands, and nodding his head. He turned to the two legendary pokemon, blocking an attack that flew their way, and then using his own on them.

The shockwave went in all directions, and Gyarados was slammed into the inner wall of the tower, jerking all of the people and pokemon on his head roughly. Piplup stumbled, waving his arms wildly as he teetered back.

“Piplup!” Dawn shrieked in horror, trying to lunge at her pokemon and grab him, but she was too late and could only watch as he fell, waving his flightless wings wildly.

“Staravia!” Ash cried out, urging his pokemon to catch the falling one. Staravia flapped his wings and streaked down, swooping under Piplup and catching him, flying up towards the top of the

tower.

Dialga roar that echoed around them before attacking Darkrai this time. The fireballs collided with the dark-type, sending him flying towards the ground, but that was only a single attack. The rest of them kept going, slamming into the side of the tower that they were in.

Gyarados roared in pain, his entire body jerking from both the force of the attacks that hit him, and the metal debris that dug into his tough skin. Ash was thrown back at Misty, both of them colliding with the wall. He groaned, and looked down at her to see if she was okay.

Misty gritted her teeth together as he moved off of her. She was clutching the disc that flew out of his arms close to her, her arm shaking from obvious pain. Ash knew that she hurt it earlier, even if the stubborn girl wouldn't admit it. Still, she was mostly alright, so he was going to let it go.

Ash rolled over, looking around for Dawn. She was holding onto Gyarados, leaning precariously on the edge of the metal structure. Her dark blue eyes looked around as a groan of stressed metal echoed through the air, meeting Ash's bright brown ones. They stared at each other for only a tenth of a second before the metal gave out under her feet and she fell, her scream echoing through the air.

...

"Darkrai!" Alice scream, running as the pokemon fell towards the garden. Tonio was quick to follow her, still carrying his laptop with him.

May pushed herself up from the ground, stumbling a bit, but Blaziken caught her. She smiled at her pokemon and said, "Remind me to give you an entire bag of treats when this is over." He nodded his head, quite content with the deal. There was no doubt in either of their minds that this would be over, that everything would be okay. It always was.

May was an optimist before anything else, and that shined through in her pokemon. They knew that bad things could happen, but always believed in the light at the end of the tunnel. Not everyone agreed with that though.

The sound of a branch crunching caught her attention, and she looked around, blinking with surprise when she saw a familiar pink-haired man stumble through the bushes.

"Baron Alberto?" she called out to him, taking in his dishevelled appearance. "Are you alright?"

"No, I am not alright," he snapped, and May was honestly surprised to see just how angry he was. "That thing caused this! That monster! It brought the others here in a plot to destroy the town! I will not stand for this!"

She had no idea what he was talking about at first, but at the realization that he was heading in the same direction Alice and Tonio ran, she quickly pieced together what this was about.

"No!" She called out urgently. "This isn't Darkrai's fault! He's been trying to stop this from happening the entire time!"

"So he knew this was going to happen!"

"And tried to stop it!"

"What would you know about the motivations of a shadow that's haunted this town for years?" Alberto practically spat at her as she and Blaziken stayed in his way, not letting him by. "You're an

outsider here. Not an expert.”

“Maybe not bu—.”

“And furthermore, you're a child,” he said the word like it was poison. “Darkrai is a monster, and I have the chance to end it now while it's weak, so move out of the way before I move you myself.”

“He's a legendary pokemon!” May cried back, clenching her fists together. “You can't just...end it!”

“Legendary pokemon,” Alberto growled, “they should just stay legends. They're violent, vicious things that should only be stories. They don't have a right to be here.”

A happy laugh echoed through May's thoughts as a pair of adoring eyes ran through her memory.

“Love you, Mama. Love you, May.”

Tear welled up in her sapphire eyes at the memory of Manaphy, and May shook her head violently. “You're wrong! Take that back!”

He scoffed at her, moving to walk around her. “Kids like you think you know everything. You and that boy? You know nothing of the dangers of the world.”

May took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. “You don't know that!” She pointed at him. “I won't let you go near Darkrai! Especially not while he's hurt!”

His expression darkened, his holding Lickilicky's pokeball in his hands. “Get out of my way. I don't want to have to hurt a helpless little girl like you.”

In that instant, May could hear her brother's pleas for help as a glowing, orange blob surrounded him. She was trying to pull him out, but her hands slipped and she lost him. The next moment, she was watching in terror as Ash put Pikachu and Ria with her and Manaphy, sealing the safety capsule as he ran off to stop the Temple of the Sea from filling with water to save not only the temple, but them as well. Weak, helpless, unable to do anything.

Her hand clenched into a fist, shaking with anger as she narrowed her sapphire eyes at Alberto. Taking a step forward on her injured leg, May all but snarled at him. “I am not helpless! I won't let you hurt Darkrai anymore! Blaziken!”

“Ken!” Blaziken stepped in front of her, his eyes focused on Alberto.

“Idiot child,” he sighed dramatically. “If you're going to be persistent, fine. Lickilicky!” He threw his pokeball into the air, unleashing his robust, pink companion. “Get this peasant out of our way!”

The two pokemon stared at each other for a moment, Lickilicky clearly a little confused, but that didn't last very long. An explosion in the sky prompted both pokemon to move, running at each other.

...

Not caring if his clothes were soaked, Brock walked into the shallow, cold water of the fountain, picking up the unconscious pokemon that floated in the water. A Quagsire that lived in the garden helped push him up onto dry land. Brock frowned at the state of the pokemon. With burns, gashes and literal holes all over him, he wasn't in very good shape at all.

Brock lifted his head at the sound of rapid footsteps, looking just in time to see Alice, followed by

Chimchar and Tonio, rush down the ruined stairs and towards them. She knelt beside the pokemon, grimacing as she did.

Brock could understand why.

“Darkrai,” she whispered, reaching a shaking hand out and touching his head. “Darkrai? Can you hear me? Are you alright?” Darkrai shifted under her hand a bit. “Brock, is there anything we can do?”

“I don't have any type of potions or even any bandages with me,” he admitted. They were all back in the Pokemon Center, and who knew what type of condition that was in now.

“That's probably gone now,” Tonio confirmed his thoughts. “The rate of disappearance has become more and more rapid.” He had his laptop out again, typing quickly with one hand. “Come on, we just need a little bit more data.”

“Where's May?” Brock asked suddenly, realizing that his young friend wasn't there. Both of the young adults appeared startled for a moment before they looked around. He growled a bit and wanted to lash out at them for completely forgetting about her. “Alice, don't let Darkrai move too much!” There was absolutely no arguing with him at that moment, his anger audible in his voice. “Croagunk, come with me! Everyone else, stay here!”

He ran in the direction that he saw Alice and Tonio come from, his pokemon rushing beside him. He was already unsure about the fate of three of his friends, the least he could do was keep the fourth one safe.

Sky

Out Of Time, Out Of Space

Brock ran as fast as his feet could carry him over the ruined, damaged gardens, watching as little pieces of the world around him faded away. Still, he hurried as quickly as he could, trying to find his younger friend. Though a capable trainer, May was still 11, and he considered it his duty to protect all of his friends in any way that he could.

An explosion that had nothing to do with the two deities in the sky made him stumble to a stop. He looked up at the smoke, coming from a flaming tree, and ran towards it, both hoping and dreading for May to be there. He wouldn't stop or hesitate though, he had to make sure she was okay.

The rest would come after that.

...

Sapphire eyes narrowed and beads of sweat rolling from her forehead, May stared at the battle before her, not caring that she probably looked like a hot mess over anything else. There were more important things.

There was a distinct difference between coordinating and competitive battling, though aspects from one could easily bleed into the other. Some people tended to say that coordinators were a bit 'softer' than trainers, not able to create strategies to win battles the same way. There might have been some truth to that, but May travelled with a competitive battler for a little over a year, and she definitely knew a thing or two.

Though she wasn't sure Alberto did. She pegged him as one of those people who took the opportunity to have a pokemon, but never actually travelled or truly trained. Sure, Lickilicky was strong, but so was Blaziken, and he must have had years experience over her.

"Type doesn't always matter," Ash told her once when she asked. He had been putting his Corphish, Torkoal and Grovyle against one another to train. "A lot of people say I'm known for not caring about that, and maybe it's true, but it's nothing to shake your head at. Especially when you really don't know how strong your opponent is. The type advantage could easily tip a battle in your favour."

She wondered if Alberto knew Blaziken's secondary type was fighting. Probably not.

"Lickilicky, Gyro Ball!"

"Blaziken, dodge it and use Blaze Kick!"

Her pokemon jumped high into the air, fire surrounding his foot as he shot back towards Lickilicky. The impact sent the pink creature flying, ripping up the ground he skidded across.

Lickilicky stood up, visibly angry and any sort of hesitation he had to battle was completely gone. Its tongue lashed out, wrapping around Blaziken's arm and dragging the pokemon in. In a surprisingly quick motion, Lickilicky slammed a fist into the fire-type's stomach.

"Yes! Use Mega Punch again!"

"Kick it!" Though that wasn't a direct command for an attack, Blaziken still did as she said, resorting to punching and licking the normal-type. The two pokemon fought each other without orders, not resorting to actual attacks as they sparred.

Neither one were about to back down to the other.

...

“Dawn!” Ash yelled as he watched the younger girl fall straight down, nothing below her but the solid ground hundreds of meters before. Panic rushed through him as her scream reached his ears, terror and fear overwhelming him as he heard Misty yell something beside him.

Ash wasn't even conscious of what he was doing, reaching his arm out as if to grab her, even if Dawn was way out of reach. He remembered the waves of aura he used to propel himself up the stairs earlier, and every bit of him focused on that as he jerked his arm.

To the normal person, it would have looked like Dawn was suddenly jerked sideways by an invisible force, but Ash could see the pale glow that was there for just a moment. She flew back up in the air, landing roughly on one of the ledges on the Space Tower.

Ash slumped down, sighing in pure relief as he watched the girl slowly sit up, keeping as far away from the edge as she could. His relief was short lived as Misty's scream startled him. He didn't even have time to react as he was jerked back, a massive metal beam from above slamming into the spot where he had been only a moment before.

Dawn screamed as the other side slammed into the tower not far from her, creating a sort of bridge between the two sides. Ash jumped on the opportunity, hurrying to the edge. “Dawn! Climb across!”

“Are you crazy?” she looked down at it, staring at the rickety metal.

“Maybe, but it's get across or stay there!”

She looked around, biting her lip as she realized there really was no choice. Ash set the music disc on the stair beside him and held the metal beam on his side, trying to keep it from moving or rolling. He glanced up at Misty briefly when she knelt beside him and did the same. They might not have made a difference, but at least it looked like they were trying. Ash would have walked out to meet Dawn half way, heights didn't scare him, but he wasn't sure the beam could take his weight added on.

Taking a deep breath, Dawn slowly walked out, holding her arms out for balance. She stumbled forward as she reached the end, practically falling onto Misty, though the older girl didn't seem to mind, just holding onto her to steady her shaking limbs.

“I'm okay,” the blue-haired girl breathed out after a moment.

Ash sighed in relief and grabbed a hold of the disc again. He was about to tell them that they had to keep going when sparks of violet light started rising into the air just beyond the stairs. Dread welled up in him as he leaned over the edge to look down, seeing the bottom of the towers starting to disappear. Something else caught his eye, over on the bridge. There were a few pokemon trainers that seemed to be holding back whatever was wearing everything apart with attacks.

“Ria, Aipom, Turtwig, come out now,” he tossed the three pokeballs into the air, startling both of the girls. Staravia landed with Piplup, and Pikachu cocked his head curiously at his trainer.

Ria glanced over the edge and instantly shuffled away from it, her hair standing on end as she growled. At least he knew he wasn't crazy for feeling weird about whatever was going on below them.

“We don't have any time, we need to run up now. If the stairs start to disappear behind us, attack it with long range attacks, it should stop it for a minute,” he started running up the rest of the stairs. “Come on!” His pokemon followed him without any hesitation at all.

Misty and Dawn exchanged surprised looks before they noticed the tower vanishing beneath them, then tore up the stairs after him.

As they got closer to the top, the stairs became much more narrow, to the point where Gyarados never could have made it through, so they would have had to run up themselves anyway.

“Watch out!” Misty yelled as fireballs shot towards them. Aipom and Turtwig were quick to throw their Swift and Razor Leafs at them, creating massive explosions in the sky.

Ash grimaced, feeling the heat rush over them, but he smirked proudly at his pokemon. “Good job guys!”

With Misty and Dawn only a few stairs behind him, he kept running, knowing that they didn't have time to stop again.

...

Lickilicky was much stronger than May anticipated, but she wasn't going to let Alberto get by her. She also didn't want Brock to interfere (once he found her), because this was her fight. She had something to prove, even if it was just to herself. May didn't want to be seen as weak or helpless, not anymore.

Watching the two pokemon just beat on each other was cruel though. Her eyes narrowed as she watched for an opening for her pokemon to be able to move, but Lickilicky was much faster than she anticipated.

Finally, she saw it, the opening that she needed. “Blaziken, use Sky Uppercut!”

Her pokemon moved fast, slamming his glowing fist into Lickylicky and throwing him up into the air. The pokemon flew up high before gravity brought it back to the ground, slamming into the dirt and sending a plume of dust in all directions.

“Lickilicky! Get up!” Alberto yelled, but as the dust settled, it was obvious that Lickilicky was down for the count.

“Yes! Good job Blaziken!” May cried out to her pokemon, grimacing when she jumped on her injured ankle. She stumbled, and almost fell, but Brock caught her.

“What have you done?” Alberto yelled at them. “The Darkrai-.”

“Isn't the problem!” May yelled back, but she wasn't worried this time. He obviously only had the one pokemon, so Darkrai was safe from him.

“You are insane,” Brock sighed at her before kneeling down in front of her. “Come on, hop on. This place is falling apart, and we need to head farther into the garden. I need to get back to check up on Darkrai too.”

At the mention of Darkrai's name (coming from Brock, since any mention of him from Alberto only infuriated her), May's stubbornness left her and she accepted the piggy-back ride. “Blaziken, lets go! You too, Baron Jerkface, unless you wanna vanish too!”

...

More and more of the tower disappeared around them as they ran up the stairs. Ash yelled with alarm as the stairs he were on started to vanish, along with those in front of him.

Misty grabbed the back of his shirt, pulling him back onto the metal that was still solid, and tossed a pokeball up. "Politoad, we need your help!"

"Buneary, you too!" Dawn called out.

The two pokemon appeared, staring at the stairs warily, as if wondering how they were supposed to help.

"Politoad, use Water Gun!"

"Buneary, use Ice Bream!"

The two attacked combined together to create a staircase made of ice. Ash laughed at the combined ingenuity of the two and said, "You guys are awesome!" He reached out to the metal wall with his free hand, slowly and carefully making his way over the ice. He was heavier than both of the girls, so if he could make it up without breaking it, so could they.

...

By the time Brock, May and a very reluctant Alberto got back to where Alice and Tonio were, many of the trainers and the pokemon from the garden had already gathered there, using their attacks to try and stop the world from vanishing around them.

The worse the fighting for in the air between Dialga and Palkia, the more the world seemed to vanished.

Tonio was typing rapidly on his laptop, while Alice knelt on the ground, allowing Darkrai to rest his head on her lap. Brock set May down beside Alice, before hurrying over to the young man. "What's going on?" He could tell by the look on Tonio's face that things were about to get worse.

"I got back the readings I needed," he said, panic seeping through in his voice as his eyes darted from his screen to the sky and back. "If they use their strongest attacks again, our dimension is finished."

Silence fell over all of them, and not even the still fuming Alberto had anything to say at that.

Brock looked towards the Space-Time Towers and said, "Come on guys."

"Brock," Alice said in a soft voice as she carefully laid Darkrai's head on the ground beside May, and walked over to him. "They're probably already gone like most of the people and pokemon are." She was really trying to be sensitive about it, but she knew it came out wrong.

"No, I don't believe that for an instant," he argued. "They're still in there, and they have a solution to this. I know they do."

"Brock..."

May watched them argue, completely on Brock's side, because she knew that when things got bad like this, that was when Ash truly started to shine. Even when it seemed like he was down, he always came back fighting.

She was about to join the argument, to insist that their friends were fine, when Darkrai started to move. She stared at the pokemon as he found the strength to hover in the air, his blue eye staring at the two legendary pokemon above them. Then he moved so fast, there was no way she could have stopped them. Streaking over their heads, Darkrai flew up at Dialga and Palkia.

“STOP!” The yelled could be heard all around as he flew in between the two, creating a barrier and stopping the attacks from colliding.

The combination of space, time and his own darkness created an ominous sphere that surrounded all of the legendary pokemon. The ground shook below them, more and more pieces of the gardens and the towers falling away, and all anyone could do was watch.

...

As the metal frame around the stairs vanished, Ash came to a sudden stop, staring at the massive sphere. He couldn't look away from it, the terrifying mixture of powers making him completely alert and on edge.

Ria whimpered behind him, feeling the same.

In the center, he could feel a familiar presence, and a rough, gravelly voice yelling a moment later confirmed his suspicions.

“This garden is everyone's!”

“Darkrai's inside of there,” he mumbled, not liking what he was feeling. The weight of the attacks was crushing down on the legendary pokemon, and Ash wasn't sure how long he could withstand that.

“Ash,” Misty poked his back roughly. “We need to get the disc up there!”

“You're right,” he nodded his head, snapping himself out of his statue-like shock. He started running up, going higher and higher with every step.

Then the tower shook roughly, causing him to stumble just as the side vanished. He kept the disc in one of his arms, using the other to try and grab the side as he plummeted down just as Dawn had earlier.

“Pikapi!”

“Riori!”

“Ash!” Two combined screams echoed through the air, and Dawn shot forward trying to grab his arm as he fell, just missing and almost toppling over herself. Misty grabbed her and pulled her back, holding onto a metal bar to keep them both steady.

“Politoad use Hydro Pump!” Misty cried out to her pokemon, who was quick to follow her orders, blasting a powerful beam of water at Ash, sending him flying to the damaged balcony on the Time Tower.

He slammed into the stone and gasped for breath, feeling a jarring ache rush up his arm that took most of the collision. He breathed in and out wildly, staying completely still until his stunned brown eyes caught sight of the disc in his arms. There was no time to worry about what just happened.

He leapt to his feet, stumbling a bit and almost falling over the side again, before turning and looking towards the two girls and the pokemon.

“Now what?” Misty called out to him.

“There's another staircase here!” He yelled back, pointing to the opening in the wall. “You guys keep going up and I'll meet you on the walkway up there!” His hand moved, pointing above them instead. “Pikachu! Watch out for Ria and everyone else! Listen to Misty and Dawn!”

“Pi pikapi!” Pikachu acknowledged, and all of the pokemon kept running. Dawn and Misty both hesitated for a moment, but Ash just nodded encouragingly and took up the stairs closest to him.

It was much less nerve-wracking running up these stone stairs, completely sealed inside of the building as opposed to surrounded by a metal frame.

Perspiration dripped from under his hat, and with every step he took, he could feel his legs burning a little bit more. He was incredibly active and had a lot of stamina, but everyone had a limit, and he was reaching his. Ash shook his head, reminding himself to ignore the aches and the pains. He had to get up to the music room, there was no other options.

Running through an indoor balcony that overlooked the swinging pendulums, Ash faltered a bit. The once bright diamonds were murky and dark, while the pendulums themselves swung completely out of sync. He dreaded to know what the Space Tower looked like, if it was even still there.

He kept going, running up another spiralling staircase, mentally making a note to recommend an elevator, or to at least have extra hot-air balloons around.

Without warning, Ash's legs gave out under him and he pitched forward, grabbing onto a thin window ledge to keep himself from face-planting on the stairs.

He gasped to breath, leaning his forehead on the cold stone.

“Come on,” Ash mumbled to himself. “You can do it. It's just a little bit further.” His legs didn't move.

The faint sound of Palkia's now familiar call caught his attention, and Ash looked out the window. He blinked with surprise when he saw the large, ominous sphere shrinking, releasing both Palkia and Dialga. He watched with confused eyes as the sphere shrunk, looking like it went inside of Darkrai. The pokemon was holding his chest, and even from where Ash was, he could feel the pain that he was in.

“Darkrai...”

The pokemon's eye snapped open and Ash's body tensed up when it looked directly at him.

“Their attacks cannot meet again. You have no more time.”

Ash was about to reply when Dialga let out a cry, Palkia's joining a moment later. Then the two pokemon attacked, creating an alliance for just that moment, both of their attacks slamming into Darkrai.

Ash gasped harshly, feeling the physical pain from the action rush through his chest. He would have sworn he could hear the screams of Dawn and Misty from somewhere above him, and he was sure that May would have done the same far below.

Darkrai rose out of the explosion, and he was almost relieved, but then Ash saw it, a single purple spark rush away from the pokemon. Then another, and another, until he was consumed by them, vanishing into nothingness.

Ash reached out, trying to find the pokemon's familiar aura, but it was nowhere. Darkrai was gone.

“Oh Mew,” Ash breathed out in horror. “Shit.” He shook his head and turned, forcing himself to look away from the battle, to move his legs up the stairs even though he could barely move them an inch.

His adrenaline fuelled him as he ran, stair after stair, finally reaching the bridge between the TimeTower and the center. He rushed across it, glancing out over the destroyed edge briefly as he hurried. Dialga was chasing Palkia around again.

Dialga was angry at Palkia and taking advantage of the fact that Palkia was injured, whereas the other pokemon was being much more aggressive for the same reason. An idea formulated in Ash's head as he saw them coming in his direction. He glanced at the disc in his arms and waved towards the two girls when he saw them appear at the edge.

“Ash!” He could have felt Misty's relief even without his aura. She scanned him over with worried eyes, and he had a feeling that she knew just how tired he was. Then again, she probably was too.

“Ash, did you see...?” Dawn trailed off, wiping at her red-rimmed eyes.

“Yeah,” he said slowly, pushing the disc into Misty's arm. “Hurry, you guys have to get that to play. Darkrai told me just before he...well he said that their attacks can't meet again.”

“How do we stop that from happening?” Dawn asked almost helplessly.

“Go play the disc.” His voice was firm, leaving absolutely no room for argument.

“And what are you going to do?” Misty demanded, suddenly suspicious as her sea green eyes stared into his bright brown ones.

“Giving you more time.

“How?”

“By doing something really stupid,” Ash admitted before turning to the broken wall again. He watched as Palkia flew towards the towers, and he waited. A split second later, he bolted towards the edge, ignoring the screams and attempts to grab him from behind. He got to the edge, and he jumped, landing directly on Palkia's back.

...

“That idiot!” Misty shrieked angrily as she watched Ash land on the enraged legendary pokemon. “That stupid son of a—!”

“The disc!” Dawn cried out. “Hurry, if we can get it to play, this ends!”

Misty took a deep breath, realizing that the younger girl was right. With a last withering look out of the hole in the wall, she ran back to where the pokemon were waiting for them.

“Pikachupi! Pi pika pikachu pi Pikapi!” Pikachu cried out.

“Ash is an idiot,” she said simply, not quite understanding what he was saying. She didn't pay him

anymore attention, hurrying over to the brass pedal and stepping on it to pop out the disc that they put in earlier.

Dawn picked it up, moving it out of the way as Misty tried to put the disc with Oracion in the slot, but she felt her heart fall into her stomach as fiddled with it. "It doesn't fit."

...

Tonio's laptop was tossed aside as he consoled a sobbing Alice, but the steady beeping from it reminded them all of what was at stake, not that they really needed another reminder.

May hated just standing around, but there was nothing else that they could do. There was so little of the town left, and the people and pokemon that were left all congregated into one area for safety. Brock was shifting around, trying to help settle people down. He was good at that, but she wasn't. Not when she was feeling just as hysterical.

At least Max wasn't there this time.

She watched as Palkia flew away from Dialga, under the towers, and then she gasped loudly. Her sapphire eyes went wide as she watched a familiar boy leap out of the towers and onto the enraged legendary's back. "Ash!"

Brock's head snapped around to her before following her gaze up to the sky. He stood up again and groaned. "That idiot!"

"I'll give him bravery points, cause I wouldn't be up there," came the whispering voice of Meowth, followed by quiet agreements from Jessie and James, all still dressed as reporters. May shouldn't have been surprised that out of everyone, they were there unscathed. They always showed up at the very end.

"What's he doing?" May asked, as if Brock would know the answer to Ash's insanity.

Brock grimaced, because he actually did have an answer, or at least an educated guess. "Misty and Dawn are still inside." That he knew for certain, because Ash would never leave them behind. "Pikachu and Ria aren't with him either. My best guess, he's trying to buy more time."

He was really going to have to sit down with Ash and have a seriously talk with him about always acting like the hero.

...

Ash winced as Palkia twisted beneath him, angrily trying to buck him off. Luckily though, Dialga wasn't attacking anymore. In fact, from the brief glance Ash got of the pokemon while on this living roller-coaster, he would have guessed that Dialga was amused by this turn of events.

He could just imagine it now. 'Haha you got a human on you.' 'Get it off! Get it off!'

Yes, his exhaustion was definitely catching up with him. He shifted a bit, climbing higher and closer to Palkia's injured arm. Once he got there, Ash pressed a hand to the top of the pokemon's head and mumbled, "I'm a friend. I promise, I won't hurt you. You have to trust me." Using his aura, he tried to convey that he wasn't there to harm the legendary, he was only there to help. This was something he was good at, something he had done with his own pokemon many times before, reaching out to them.

It felt like forever to him, but Palkia stopped struggling and tossing around in every direction,

though he didn't stop moving. Ash sighed in relief, feeling a light, curious touch from the pokemon's own mind. It wasn't afraid of him anymore, more perplexed than anything. Through that bond, Ash could feel all of the pain and betrayal going through the pokemon and came to the conclusion that neither legendary probably realized the scope of what they were doing.

Anger could easily create tunnel vision, something he was all too aware of. If he could get some of Palkia's pain to go away though, the pokemon might realize what it was doing and it might stop.

He stared at the cracked pearl on Palkia's arm and grimaced, realizing how painful that must be. He wanted the pain to go away, to heal that horrible crack.

Ash could feel something, a warmth building up within his chest, something different from anything he ever felt before. Without a second thought, he reached out, pressing his hand over the cracked pearl. The warmth from his chest suddenly rushed through his arm as his hand started to glow lightly.

For a moment, nothing happened, but then the pale bluish-green glow seeped onto the stone, spreading across it. The cracks started to shine brightly, sealing right before his eyes. He waited just a few seconds, and then pulled his hand back. The pearl was completely healed.

Palkia actually cooed, and Ash could feel the wave of gratitude, of happiness, that came from the pokemon. He could barely make heads or tails of that, his head swimming as his eyes fluttered.

The hand that was holding onto Palkia loosened, and the last thing he remembered was Dialga's angry cry as his eyes closed from sheer exhaustion and he fell.

...

Panic rushed through Misty as she looked at the disc. "This is Oracion, right?"

"Yeah, it must be," Dawn said with the same urgency. She was the one that picked the disc, it had to be right or this was all for nothing. She watched as Misty helped it up, and gasped. "The back! It's like the middle."

"Huh?" Misty flipped it over, staring at the pattern on the back before looking at the slots again. Circle in the middle that she thought was decoration has the same pattern, and looked like it was the right size. She placed it in the center and pushed down, relief flooding her when it slipped it without a problem. "Oh thank Mew."

Dawn rushed to the lever, trying to pull down, but she wasn't nearly strong enough on her own. Misty was at her side a moment later, and together, the two girls tugged on the old, bronze lever.

"They really need to look into adding MP3s or something," Misty grunted as her arms shook.

"No kidding," Dawn agreed as it slowly started to budge. They struggled to get it half way down, but then ended up falling to the floor as it clicked in place rapidly.

Misty panted, staring up as electricity started to spark above them. She almost let out a laugh as the machine started to hum, but then the sound completely died.

"The power," Dawn gasped in horror.

"It's dead," Misty finished and put her face in her hands.

...

Ash didn't hit the ground, but hitting something solid was enough to jar him back to the land of the living. He blinked with confusion, before realizing that he was being held by a huge arm. Looking up, he almost flailed with surprise, seeing that Palkia was the one flying with him.

Palkia avoided all of Dialga's attacks so far, but Ash could feel it's frustration rising again. He reached a hand out, touching the pokemon's chest and said, "It's okay. Don't fight anymore. I promise, it'll be okay. This is all a misunderstanding." He wasn't sure if Palkia was actually listening to him or not. The pokemon probably saved him out of a sense of honour: he healed it, so now it was saving him. Once he was somewhere 'safe' though, who knew what would happen.

"Come on Mist, Dawn," Ash mumbled. "You can do it. I know you can."

...

Frustration welled up in her, and she slammed her fist onto the metal behind her. Pain ripped up her arm – the one that had been more injured earlier than she let on – and she bit back a scream, but the pain prompted the tears that were already starting to appear to fall down her cheeks.

"How does he do it?" she mumbled more to herself than anything. All they had to do was get a stupid disc to play, and they couldn't even do that. It was nothing compared to what Ash had done in the past – what he was doing now. He always ran off ahead and got himself in some sort of trouble, but he always saved the day in the end. He would come flying back on some strange pokemon with Pikachu and ever thing would be -.

"Pikachu!" Misty's head snapped up, startling the yellow pokemon. He had been cuddling Ria, who was quaking, completely terrified. Misty stood up, scooping Ria into the arm that didn't hurt to move, and said, "Pikachu, get up there. You can try to power it with your electricity!"

"Pachirisu can help!" Dawn cried out, tossing her pokeball up into the air. Her blue pokemon appeared up closer to the prongs.

"Pi Pikachu!" Pikachu nodded at her and spoke to Staravia. The flying-type nodded, allowing Pikachu to climb on his back and flying him up to the other prong before quickly flying back down.

"Pachirisu, Discharge!"

"Risu!"

"Pikachu, Thunderbolt! Give it as much as you've got!"

"Piiiiikaaaa chuuuuu!"

"Paaaachiri suuuuuuuuu!"

Yellow and blue electricity flew through the air, and they all waited with baited breath. The hum started up again as the levels came to life and the massive, metal gears started to move.

Then, a single, starting chime echoed through the air, and Misty fell to her knees in relief, Dawn flopping down onto the floor beside her. Both girls let out disbelieving laughs. They actually did it.

...

Alice jerked with surprise as the familiar sound chimed through the air, staring up at what remained of the Space-Time Towers with wide eyes. "It can't be..."

“That's Oracion,” Brock breathed out with such certainty that no one could argue with him. The song that Alice played for them all along was the key to everything without them even realizing it.

“What's happening?” May asked as the towers themselves started to give off a pale, golden glow. No one answered her, because no one had an answer. Instead, her attention was drawn to the two pokémon in the sky. Dialga had been charging up an attack while Palkia held onto Ash (she was going to enjoy hearing Misty yell at him later for this debacle), but now they were still, staring at the towers as if transfixed.

High above them, Ash could have cried from relief as he heard the sound start, actually letting out a laugh. “I knew they could do it,” he said aloud, though he wasn't sure if he was talking to himself or Palkia. It didn't particularly matter at the moment. Though still tired, he couldn't help but be transfixed as the towers started to glow, and then massive decorations sprouted from the sides, flecks of golden glitter and light trailing off of it.

Then, almost blindingly, the light erupted into two massive, glittering wings, coming from the tower. Ash shielded his eyes as he felt Palkia move again, only opening them when he heard a cry of his name.

Palkia set him down on one of the balconies of the tower before flying high into the air again. He turned as Misty, Dawn and the pokémon ran at him, laughing and stumbling as Ria and Pikachu jumped into his arms, nuzzling him, while Aipom climbed onto his head, and Turtwig and Staravia nuzzled his legs.

“I'm okay,” he assured them as the soothing song played in the air. He was honestly a bit surprised when they all jumped off of him, opting to stare at the light display in awe. His arms weren't empty for long as Misty practically threw herself at him, her arms going around his middle as she squeezed him roughly. She buried her face into his shoulder and let out a muffled growl. “You stupid idiot.”

“I knew you could do it,” Ash laughed as he wrapped his arms around her, resting his cheek on the top of her head. His brown eyes flickered to Dawn, who grinned and winked before turning her head, staring out over the balcony. “Well, you and Dawn, of course.”

“Idiot.” Misty shifted so that her head was still on his shoulder, but she could see what was happening.

Dialga and Palkia roared again, but this wasn't the same ones from before. They were powerful, but warm and calm. Everyone watched with baited breath as the two faced each other and let out grumbles of communication that no one else could understand.

Then, Dialga flew into the air before vanishing in the blink of an eye, like it was never there to begin with.

Ash looked up as Palkia hovered above them, staring down directly at him. He felt himself squeezing Misty with one arm, reaching out with the other and tugging Dawn closer as if he could protect them both from the pokémon. “Palkia! I know you were hurt but...look at everything else you hurt! The people! The pokémon! The town's completely gone!” His voice lowered. “You have to bring it back.”

“Palkia!” Dawn agreed with him. “I know you can do it!”

“Please!” Misty added. “You're the only one who can!”

“Pikachu!”

“Ri riolu!”

Palkia stared at the three of them and their pokemon as a visible pink aura surrounded its body. It hunched up and then let out a cry that seemed to echo eternally, as pink energy exploded outward, consuming everything in its path. Ash yanked Dawn closer so that the 10-year-old wouldn't get thrown back by the rush of power, using his other arm to keep Misty steady on her feet. The pokemon all grabbed onto the legs of the person closest to them as a powerful wind whipped by them.

There was an explosion of white light, and then everything went quiet.

Sky

Truth

There were moments when Ash could see better with his eyes closed. With light blinding them all, sight was useless, but he could still see the warm auras of Misty, Dawn, Pikachu, Ria and the other pokemon. He could faintly see the outline of the towers as the power of Oracion slowly started to fade away – non-living things normally didn't give off an aura of their own, he could seem them when aura from the earth bounced off of them (at least, he assumed that's what was going on). Then, he could see everything else that wasn't there moments ago.

Slowly blinking open his eyes, he was met with the crystal clear waters and the bright blue sky of Alamos Town. The town was entirely in tact, without a single stone missing. A warm, genuine breeze, something that had had been missing during the destruction of the town, rushed by them, and Ash shook both girls' shoulders. "Look."

Misty opened her eyes and gasped in awe. Much to his enjoyment, she didn't move away to look around. If anything, she shifted closer to his side. "Everything's back."

Dawn lurched away from his grip, though he didn't even try to stop her. She looked down, eyes watering a little bit. "Look, even the people who disappeared are back!"

The pokemon all ran towards the edge of the ledge they were all, cooing and chattering happily to one another.

They did it, everything was safe.

...

Brock was the first to open his eyes after light temporarily blinded them all. He perked up, gasping in surprise. "Everything's back!"

Given that she was leaning on him, May heard and reacted first, her sapphire eyes opening as she stared out over Alamos Town. She laughed and took a few steps away from him, stumbling a bit, but it didn't matter since she was going for her Blaziken. She hugged him tightly as she laughed joyously. The pokemon mirrored her excitement as he picked her up, knowing that she couldn't really walk on her own right now.

She grinned broadly at Brock. "I knew they could do it!"

He nodded his head and looked around to speak to Alice or Tonio, but was surprised when his little Happiny jumped into his arms. He laughed and hugged the tiny pokemon. "I never doubted them for a minute." With three completely stubborn people trying to save the day, he always had faith that they could pull it off.

Tonio looked at his laptop before sighing and closing it, shoving the machine back in his bag. "Everything's back to normal on the readings too."

Alice didn't add to the joyous outcries that came from all of the trainers around. Her blue eyes darted around in the sky, a frown slowly appearing on her face. She shifted a bit, before saying something that made them all freeze. "Darkrai didn't come back like everyone else, did he?"

...

None of them wanted to make their way back down the stairs, but there was really no other option

at that moment. The only consolation was that going down was much, much easier than going up. Needless to say, they decided to take the stairs in the Space-Tower, since they were actually inside the building.

Ash was pretty sure that he'd have some sort of anxiety attack if someone else fell right now.

Pikachu was perched on Misty's shoulder, chattering to Piplup, who was sitting on Dawn's head. The blue-haired girl led the trek down the stairs, followed by Misty and then him. All of them were tired, about ready to just flop down where they stood and fall asleep. Clothes slightly torn, hair askew, and skin covered in bruises and tiny cuts, they were certainly a sight to behold.

Ash watched the two girls silently. While visibly exhausted, both girls seemed to be a little more at attention than him, and he had no idea why. It wasn't being arrogant saying that he was the most active out of them all, there was very little that could keep him down, but he was honestly ready for the longest nap in the world.

"Your aura's tired," Ria's voice echoed through his mind, not aloud like she normally projected her thoughts. "That's why you're sleepy."

"Hmm?" He mumbled barely audibly, wondering what she meant by his aura was tired. She was sitting on his shoulder though, so she could hear him.

"You used a lot of it when you help time-meanie's owie."

Ash blinked and looked at her, his lip twitching into a smile. Sometimes it was easy to forget that pokémon weren't all just battle ready when they first met. Sometimes they were still just children or babies too, and hearing Ria call Palkia a 'time-meanie' with an 'owie' was more than just a little amusing.

He shook his head, chuckling a bit. Still, he guessed that made sense. He never knew that he could heal something, but in retrospect, that might explain a lot about himself. He was rarely ever sick, and he tended to shrug off injuries much quicker than most people, something he always bragged about to his friends, Gary and Leaf, when he was younger. If he could heal someone else without really knowing what he was doing, self-preservation probably would have let him subconsciously heal himself too.

Ash knew that he had a lot to learn about aura, but until he found someone to teach him about it, he'd have to just take these new discoveries as they came. His eyes flickered to Dawn. He felt a little bad for not telling her, especially after what just happened. He knew she deserved an answer about how he knew what the problem with the two legendary pokémon were, how she was saved when she fell off the tower, and so much more. Ash was never one for silence, he was rather open and straight forward, but sometimes it was better just to stay quiet.

"Blame it on the funny place we were in," Ria whispered to him when he projected his thoughts to her, hoping that the small piece of her that was wise beyond her years thanks to Lucario, would know what to do. Ash mulled that over and nodded his head. That was viable, since they were in another dimension at the time, things could have been different. He'd only bring it up if she asked though. A lot had happened, and she was very much a go-with-the-flow type of person, so if she hadn't brought it up yet, she probably wouldn't any time soon.

"Land!" Dawn cried out as she jumped off the last step, purposely dropping to her knees. Piplup jumped off her head and did the same, though he looked like he was hugging the ground.

"Come on, we need to find everyone else," Misty reminded her, nudging her with her foot. Dawn

groaned a bit, but still held up a hand, letting the older girl yank her to her feet.

Their footsteps echoed loudly as they walked through the empty, massive hall and out the large, front doors. Stepping into the square in front of the Space-Time Towers was an odd experience, because everything was there, perfectly in tact like nothing happened to at all.

Ash let out a breath that he was holding, not quite sure what he was expecting, maybe for the world to have come back together upside down or something stupid like that.

“Ash! Misty! Dawn!” They all looked up as Brock's voice echoed across the courtyard. He hurried out of the garden, running towards them with a broad smile on his face.

Despite how tired he was, Ash jumped and waved at his friend. “Brock!” He looked over as Blaziken jumped ahead, getting to them in only two or three bounds, May sitting comfortably in her pokemon's arms. He set her down, and she let out a laugh as she lurched towards them, throwing her arms around both Misty and Dawn at the same time.

“I knew you could do it!” she cried out excitedly as she squeezed them. “I knew you could figure out what Oracion was! And you guys got it to play too!” She took a step back, not putting much weight on her injured leg, but smiling all the while. She turned towards Ash and said, “Looks like you weren't the only one who got to play the hero this time, huh?”

He chuckled at her and said, “No. It was definitely Misty and Dawn who saved the day this time.”

“Don't sell yourself short,” Brock shook his head as he reached them, clapping his hand on Ash's shoulder roughly and ignoring his protesting whine. “We saw you jump on Palkia. I gotta ask, what the hell were you thinking?”

Ash smiled at him, completely unrepentant for his actions. “I...didn't really think. We needed more time and Palkia needed to calm down. Well, they both did, but I could only jump on one.”

“So you jumped on it?” The skepticism in Brock's voice was painfully obvious.

He bristled and pouted at him. “It worked, didn't it?”

“Yeah, but you still almost gave me a heart attack when you fell.”

“Wait, what?” Misty spoke up, turning her attention from May to the two boys. Her sea green eyes narrowed at she looked at Ash. “Fell?”

He chuckled sheepishly and May practically bounced on one leg. “Yeah. He was on Palkia's back and everything seemed fine for a minute, then the next he decided to fall off.”

“I didn't decide to fall off. I slipped,” Ash argued with her.

“Well whatever you said to Palkia must have left an impression, since it decided to catch you before you hit the ground,” she argued back.

“Seriously,” Misty sighed, “You are either going to fall to your doom or drown! We need to keep your feet on the ground and not let you go anywhere!”

“Everything turned out fine,” Ash argued with her.

“Not the point!”

“Guys, we should get our pokemon to the Pokemon Center,” Brock interrupted before they could

start arguing. “Nurse Joy said she was going to take the pokemon that were battling first. May needs to get her ankle looked at, and we could all do with a shower, some bandages, and maybe some sleep.”

Ash's stomach gurgled loudly, getting a laugh out of Dawn and May. “And some food,” Brock added with a sigh. “Everything did turn out alright this time, so lets just be thankful for that.” His smiled faded a little. “Well, almost.”

“Almost?” Misty looked around for a moment, as if trying to spot the problem, and her eyes went wide. “Alice and Tonio! Are they-?”

“They're okay,” Brock assured them as Ash and Dawn adopted almost identical expressions of worry. “Well, for the most part. Alice is pretty upset.”

“About what?”

“Darkrai didn't come back,” May told them, her voice sad as she twisted her hair in her fingers. “We looked a bit but we couldn't find him anywhere.” Her sapphire eyes glanced at Ash with an almost hopeful expression, though she didn't say anything.

Ash couldn't read minds, he wasn't a psychic, but he did know what it was that May wanted, just because he knew her. She wanted to know if he could find Darkrai. He knew that the legendary pokemon definitely wasn't around them right now, and it would take a while of searching to see if he was hidden in the gardens again.

Honestly, Ash didn't have the energy to do that right now. He shook his head at May, and she frowned, looking down at her shoes.

“It's not fair,” Dawn blurted out suddenly, startling everyone else. Her wide eyes were filled with tears as she hugged Piplup close. “Darkrai – everyone was so horrible to him. Nobody understood him. All he was trying to do was protect everyone here!”

“It's not fair,” Ash agreed after a tense moment of silence. “I think Darkrai knew what would happen to him, but he wanted to save everyone here, no matter how they treated him. He wanted people to be happy and I don't think he'd want us to be too sad.”

“Well, if anyone tries to paint him as the villain again,” May spoke up, slapping her fist into her palm. “I'll kick their butts just like I did with Baron Jerkface. He saved everyone.” Her demeanour softened. “I guess, all we can do is remember him. We knew he was trying to do the right thing, and as long as someone knew...” She shrugged. “We'll just have to make sure that everyone knows the real story.”

No one said anything else after that, a peaceful, sad silence hanging over them all as they watched the gardens as if the pokemon in question would appear before them if they waited long enough. There was so much to talk about, but so little energy to actually speak.

No one really knew what to say to that, standing silently and sadly together as the sun slowly started to set.

...

Sleep came easily to Ash once they finally got back to the Pokemon Center. His problem lied in actually staying asleep, constantly being jerked out of nightmares just to fall back into his slumber easily, over and over again. With how exhausted he was, it was disorienting.

Finally, he sat up, putting his face into his hands. He was so tired, but he couldn't sleep right. He could hear Brock's snores, and was instantly jealous of his older friend. Once a crisis was over and everyone was safe, Brock was always able to sleep easily though. He was lucky that way.

He shook his head a bit as if that would make his runaway thoughts get under control and actually let him sleep like he wanted to.

Then a very familiar aura appeared in his room without warning.

Ash's bright brown eyes snapped open and his head jerked up. Mouth falling open in shock, all he could do was stare directly at a large, glowing blue eye, the other shielded from view by flowing, white hair.

"Darkrai," he breathed out as he stared at the pokemon, only visibly in the light of the moon. "Are you..." He wasn't sure what he wanted to ask. Was this a dream? Was Darkrai alive? That seemed stupid because he knew he was awake and he could feel Darkrai's distinct energy.

The pokemon nodded his head.

"Everyone thinks your dead!" Ash blurted out, completely forgetting that Brock was in the same room. "Alice was so upset over it and she'd be so happy to see you again! No one is ever going to try to hurt you anymore!"

Darkrai slowly shook his head, his gravelly voice coming out low and calmly. "Perhaps it's best for them to think I've gone."

"I don't...if you want everyone to think you're dead, why come to me?" Ash asked him, feeling both confused and upset. He waved his hands in the air. In that moment, he felt like every little frustration that he had came to a peak and burst out. "Actually, why me this whole time? You gave me that dream to try and warn me. You told me that they would destroy everything. You wanted me to stop them. Why?"

Darkrai stared at him with an almost knowing look. "You had a dream of this without my influence, did you not?"

Ash tensed up, not sure how he'd know that. "Yes." For a brief moment, he thought about how strange it was to hear Darkrai talk so much, but quickly shrugged that off and forced himself back to the conversation at hand.

"Then you know the answer to your questions."

He blinked with confusion, feeling so completely unsure about what this legendary pokemon was saying. "My aura."

Darkrai actually chuckled at him. "That may be a part of it, but no, that is not why. You know why it had to be you, Ash Ketchum. You've known since you were young. Others, they have psychic or empathetic powers, or can even link their hearts to pokemon, but you are something different all together. Even from the others who can use aura."

Ash's mouth closed at that. He'd met psychics like Sabrina the Saffron City Gym Leader (amongst many others), and he'd met people who had empathetic links to pokemon like Anabel, but he never thought he was anything special compared to them.

Then again, he did have aura, and that was really shaping up to be all of those things combined. Not that he knew how to actually control it, just doing things on a whim and hoping they worked.

So he had no idea what would make him special compared to others who could actually use aura properly.

Darkrai was silently watching him as he mulled his words over. He thought back even farther, back to the first day he left home, sitting on the ground in a hopeless mess, and seeing Ho-oh fly across the sky. Then he pictured Ho-oh's counterpart, and Ash knew what the dark-type was talking about.

“What if I don't want it to be more anymore?” he asked, his voice soft and almost pleading. “Sure, I want to be a Pokemon Master, the best Pokemon Master, but...I don't want to be this.” He looked down at his hands as they grasped the blanket that was over him.

He suddenly remembered that Brock was there and turned to say something, completely surprised that his friend was still asleep.

“He cannot hear us,” Darkrai whispered. “You must understand, this is just the beginning.”

“The beginning?” Ash's head snapped up and he stared at Darkrai incredulously. “Things are going to get worse?”

“Much worse, and that is when the world will need you most.”

His entire body was tense before he shook his head violently. “I can't...”

“You must.”

“I don't have a choice?”

Darkrai didn't answer, fading into the shadows on the floor. “Tell none I was here. It is for the best.” Then the shadow slid away out the window.

Ash leapt out of the bed, running after the shadow. He leaned against the window, his eyes scanning the dark town before him and unable to detect the pokemon in any other way. He wondered if it was even there, or if he was going crazy. He slowly took a few steps back, closing the window and then turning and stumbling back to his bed, flopping onto it face first.

In his confusion, somehow, sleep finally came.

...

“Ash! Get up or you won't get any breakfast!” Dawn yelled as she kicked the door to his and Brock's room. “The contest is starting soon!”

He groaned, rolling over on the soft bed that he really didn't want to get up from. He sort-of woke up earlier when Brock did, but his fitful night's sleep and Darkrai's visit exhausted him. He managed to get up earlier and tug on his jeans and white t-shirt, but that was as far as he got before he tumbled back into his bed and dozed off again.

No one bothered him until now.

“I'll be there in a few minutes,” he called back. “Go ahead.” He could almost picture her huffing before she walked away, leaving him sprawled out in silence. He was tired.

His bright brown eyes fluttered shut, though he was technically still awake. Even if he was in a dead sleep, not much could sneak up on him anymore, which Dawn attributed to him being a light

sleeper. If only she knew.

He wasn't quite sure how long he stayed there, but he was broken out of his silent musing when someone knocked at the door. He didn't move to acknowledge them though. Not that he had to, as the keycard was put in the door, unlocking it.

"Ash?" Misty asked him quietly as she entered the room, closing the door behind her. "Brock lent me his key, you missed breakfast." She walked over to where he was laying, taking a seat beside him and tapping his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

He rolled over slightly and stared at her with exhausted eyes. He wanted to talk to Misty, to spill out everything and hope that she'd call all his worries ridiculous, maybe smack him over the head hard enough to forget the conversation ever happened. Too bad she wasn't as violent as she used to be.

Darkrai told him not to tell anyone, but hiding something from Misty felt wrong. Sure, he hid things from his mother (she would have dragged him back home by his ears if she knew all the times he almost died), Brock and some of his other friends, even Misty in the past, but now the idea of lying to her was really unsettling. His mother told him time and time again (even more so in recent months, bless her heart he'd have to get her another good present soon, maybe a new spade to use in her garden) that trust was so very important, and that lying was the seed of all things bad. Yes, he would really have to get her something nice.

"Darkrai's alive." He couldn't lie to her. "I'm not supposed to tell anyone. Not even you. He asked me not to."

Misty's expression changed from surprised, to confused, and then she smiled at him, not saying anything and waiting for him to continue.

Ash realized this, pushing himself up and moving so that he was sitting beside her instead of just flopped out. He stared down at his hands, watching as he subconsciously picked at the frayed strings on his jeans. "He said...he said that what happened here was just the beginning, that it was going to lead up to something bigger and...I don't know if I can deal with that." He looked up at her, his face suddenly frustrated. "I shouldn't have to! They're the legendary pokemon! It's their problem! He said that I don't get a choice though." His shoulders slumped again as the anger left as quickly as it came. "It has to be me. I always does."

Misty was silent before slapping his arm lightly, not to hurt him but just to get his attention. He stared up at her, a bit surprised to see that she was regarding him as if he was completely insane. "Don't be stupid. There's always a choice. So some legendary pokemon think that you're some sort of Chosen One, it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is what you decide you want to do." She tapped his cheek roughly, causing him to whine and rub his face with a pout. "What happened to Mr. Stubborn who always got up in my face even though he knew that he was wrong? Who argues with just about everything?"

A smile slowly appeared on Ash's face. "Well..."

"No, I'm not done!" Misty threw both of her hands up in the air. "You never let anyone tell you what you can and can't be. People scoff at you and you just show them how wrong they are! Even me! I thought you were some dense, bullying, arrogant brat of a trainer who would never go anywhere! Then I saw you catch that Caterpie and saw just how much you loved the gross bug and I realized that while you were dense, arrogant and a brat, you weren't a bully, you loved pokemon, and maybe you could go somewhere!" She let her hands fall onto his shoulders, where she grabbed him and shook him. "Come on, don't go soft on me now. The ones who just do what their told are

the ones who don't get anywhere! You know that!"

Ash stared at her, his face the picture of what it was like to be stunned.

"Seriously, no one can tell you what you have to do or who to be! Hell, you tell us that all the time! You encourage all of your friends not to give up on their dreams, to not listen to when people say they can't do something or have to do it a certain way. Don't get all hypocritical on me now!" She pouted at him. "Hell, if I knew it was that easy to get you to conform, I'd make you stop dressing like you rolled out of the bushes every morning."

He laughed. It was loud and so powerful that it actually hurt his chest. He leaned forward, holding onto his stomach as the laughter engulfed him. It really wasn't all that funny, but still, there were tears starting to run down his cheeks. After a moment of hysterics, he looked back up at her, taking a few deep breaths to calm himself. He stared for just a moment and said, "I do usually roll out of the bushes every morning."

Misty snorted at him. "Unbelievable. I give you this amazing pep-talk and you pick up on that."

His expression softened, and he reached up, taking one of her hands off of his shoulder and squeezing it instead. "Thanks Misty. You're right. There's just been so much going on over the past few days and I can barely tell what's up and down anymore." He blinked at her. "And thanks for dealing with me even though I always drag you into hair-brained adventures too."

"Eh, it makes life interesting, besides, I like dealing with you," she smiled at him warmly. "So, are you going to be a big pouty baby and listen to a pokemon that barely knows you? Or are you going to listen to your awesome girlfriend who still likes you even though you're a complete goober and you still owe her a bike?"

"You got your bike back!"

"Not from you!"

"So? It's still intact!"

"That's not the point!"

"What is the point?"

"You know what the point is!"

"No I don't!"

"You do too!"

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

"What were we talking about again?"

"I have no idea!"

They stared at one another, both trying desperately not to be the first to laugh. Misty's lips twitched up into a smile, causing Ash to let out a snort, and then they both burst out laughing. He was still tired, but a bit of life came back to him. Darkrai's words had been dragging him down, but there was no need for that.

"Thanks," he repeated again when they both calmed down, finally grabbing his discarded socks and pulling them on. He hopped to his feet, flipping on his gloves and then his vest. Still smiling, he held a hand out.

She shook her head but let him pull her up. He didn't tug her that hard, but she purposely yanked him forward once she was standing, almost laughing at his surprised look as she kissed him. He was surprised, but kissed her back.

She was right, he never let anyone tell him who he had to be before, and he wasn't about to start now just because of some legendary pokemon.

"Ash! Misty! Come on!" May yelled from outside the door, banging on it and startling them away from one another. "The contest is going to start soon!"

Ash shook his head and laughed, grabbing his hat and putting it on his head before pulling on his sneakers. He opened the door, smiling at the girl. "We're coming. Go on, you need to get there first. We'll be there. Plus I'm going to buy all the food in the world when we're there."

"You would. Brock's waiting for you!" She turned around and rushed away, not letting her slight limp bother her.

Ash turned and faced Misty, holding his hand out to her. She rolled her eyes at him and took his hand, following him out of the room and down the stairs to get their pokemon.

Brock was leaning against the desk, staring at Nurse Joy with a star-struck expression. He grinned broadly at them as they approached and said, "I have a date with Joy tonight."

"What?"

"Seriously?"

Brock looked unamused before saying, "You guys are hilarious. Get your pokemon and let's go."

Ria cooed happily and jumped into Ash's arms when she was brought out of the back room. Pikachu waved at Nurse Joy and leapt up onto Ash's shoulder, nuzzling his face.

Ash and Misty were both too stunned by this revelation to really notice their pokemon though, both snapping their pokeballs to their belts out of instinct rather than a conscious decision. Brock had a date with Nurse Joy? That was easily the strangest thing they came across in Alamos Town.

Ash shook his head first to break himself out of the stunned silence. He looked at Misty, who was still visibly gaping at Brock, and then turned his attention to the young man in question, chuckling a bit at how starstruck he looked. There was something about Brock's small triumph that made him think a little more about himself.

Ash had no idea what was coming in the future, but he wasn't going to let that change his goals or who he was. He would keep trekking forward to become the greatest Pokemon Master in the world, and he knew he could do it because he would have his friends there backing him up, even if they weren't actually there with him.

Darkrai was wrong, he thought. He did have a choice, and he wasn't going to let anything else distract him from his dreams.

Ash smiled warmly at Pikachu, who climbed up onto his head, and at Ria, who cooed happily and waved at some of the other pokemon that were around them. He wasn't going to let his worries get to him, putting them all aside for now. He just wanted to have fun with his friends and enjoy the contest like a normal trainer.

As they walked out of the Pokemon Center, a small flash of light caught Ash's attention, making him do a double take. He stared at his reflection in the metal of the door before shaking his head. He was still seeing Dialga and Palkia everywhere he went, or so he assumed.

Why else would he have sworn that there was a pokemon with red eyes staring back at him from the reflective surface?

-The End-

Sky



End Notes

This one hasn't been edited as much as the first two so you might find more typos or silly mistakes. I apologize for that and I'll work on editing them a little more in the future.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!